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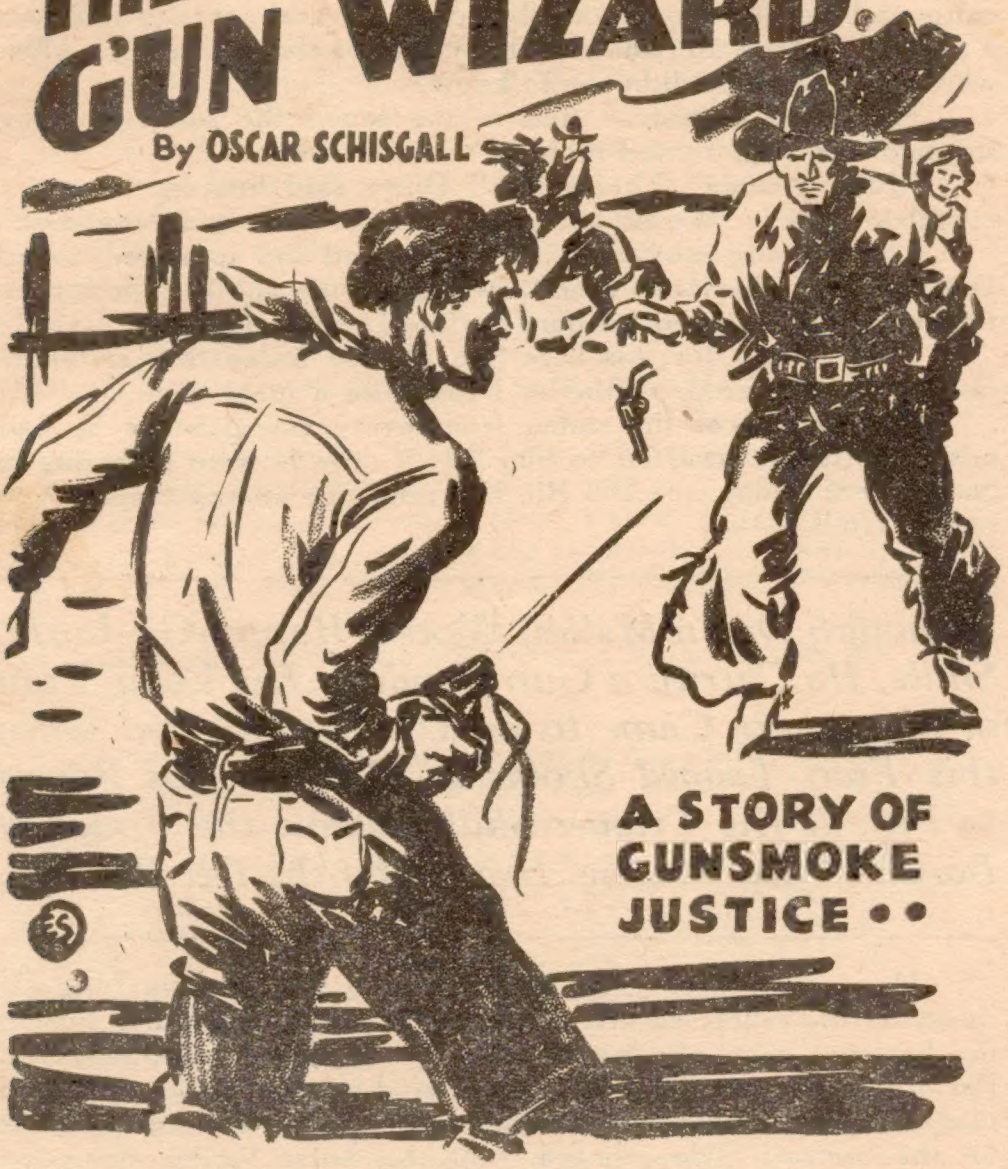


Chapter I. The Hundred Dollar Chance.

WHILE the exhausted mustang drank from the creek, Dusty Malloy sat wearily under a willow and lowered his face into his hands. With his sombrero thrust to the back of his dishevelled dark hair, he shut blood-shot eyes. It was hard to go on hunting an hombre like this, day after day, week after week, when you were tired and starved and penniless. It was hard, too, to be a bitter, relentless man at nineteen.

He wondered if it wouldn't be wiser to forget the quest. "I could get me a job on a ranch," he reflected. "I could poke cattle and eat three square meals a day. I could earn forty dollars a month." After all, what was the use of endlessly trailing a killer whose real name he didn't even know?

He sighed audibly. And at the sound the sorrel mustang stopped drinking, turned its head to look at him.

"Just dreamin', Firecracker," Dusty said huskily, forcing a mirthless smile. "We ain't ready to quit yet—not by a long shot."

The mustang snorted as if it understood and approved. And Dusty, rising to his lanky height, swung into the saddle. He forded the creek and resumed his hunt for the Del Rio Kid.

"We'll head for this here San Marese rodeo they're talkin' about," he muttered. "Maybe I can raise a meal there."

He'd heard of the rodeo from every cow-puncher he had passed. And it occurred to him that if crowds were gathering in San Marese to-day, the Del Rio Kid might be among them. You couldn't tell——

Although Dusty Malloy Wore a Happy-Go-Lucky Smile, He Carried a Gun Grudge. His Long Trail of Vengeance Came to an Unexpected End when this Two-Legged Shooting-Machine was Forced to Pit All His Trigger-Skill Against the Toughest Bunch in San Marese, Headed by the Del Rio Kid.

He rode slowly. The mid-afternoon sun, beating furiously down on the range, sucked sweat out of the horse. Dusty tugged the battered brim of his sombrero low to shade searching eyes. Far to the right he could discern scattered herds of cattle. Beyond them, in the the distance, the purple Pecos lay like storm clouds on the horizon. He grunted, sent the horse loping along the line where green short grass met a sea of brown sage. And after half an hour he reached San Marese in its valley.

He dismounted in front of the post office. Leaving the mustang at a hitch rack in the shade of the building, he tightened his gun-belt and strode on quickly; strode towards the noisy mobs outside the town.

Within a couple of minutes he was pushing his way through the surging crowds. Everywhere posters and placards announcing various events were tacked up to posts and the flaps of tents. And

suddenly he spied one notice that made him halt. His heart began to thud abnormally. For the placard announced:

SIX-SHOOTER MARKSMANSHIP CONTEST
PRIZE $100 CASH
TIME 5 P.M.
FILE NAME WITH JOHN C. DALEY, TENT 5
ENTRANCE FEE $2.00.

Dusty read the poster twice. Then he swung around on his heels, his eyes filled with a mixture of hope and despair.

"Two dollars!" he thought. "Doggone it, if only I could raise that much I'd have a whack at the prize money! I could eat on it an'—an' go on huntin' for months!"

He pushed on in a daze. The tantalizing odors of food tormented him. Men were yelling from various tents: "Step right up and eat gents! Right this way! No use goin' hungry."

Dusty groaned.

"Two dollars," he thought. "By the great tarantula, if I could only raise two dollars!"

The greatest part of the noisy, jubilant throng was gathered around an arena at his left. Men screamed cheers and howls of derision while various cow-punchers struggled to demonstrate their skill at bulldogging. But Dusty didn't go toward the excitement. He was looking around desperately for some means of raising two dollars.

Presently he saw a thickset cattleman whose attire proclaimed him to be rich. The man was dressed in black. His boots looked new. His creamy Stetson was spotless. He stood with his hands on his hips and surveyed an enormous prize bull about which half a dozen other ranchers were gathered in admiration.

A daring idea sizzled through Dusty Malloy's brain, and he acted on it at once.

He went forward quickly, touched the elbow of the heavy cattleman. As the man turned, Dusty asked:

"Could I talk to you alone a minute?"

The man was obviously startled. Nevertheless, he nodded and followed Dusty Malloy some ten feet.

"What can I do for you, son?"

"Look," Dusty began earnestly. "If you could make fifty dollars inside of an hour by investing two dollars now, would you do it?"

The rancher blinked. Then a slow grin crawled across his features. "What's the matter, cowboy? Have a drop too much?"

"No!" earnestly. "I'm serious."

"Suppose you make yourself clear."

With a sideward jerk of his head, Dusty said rapidly, "There's a hundred dollar prize posted for the six-gun marksmanship contest. I'd like to get into that contest, mister. But I haven't got the two dollars entry fee. If you stake me to that, I'll give you half the prize!"

The cattleman stared.

"Say," he finally managed, blinking. "Do I understand you're offering me half the prize before you even **win** it?"

"I'll win it!"

"You're either drunk or crazy."

"No! I —"

"Do you know who you're up against in this contest?"

"It don't matter."

"Don't **matter?**" The stock cattleman regarded Dusty as if he were showing indications of sunstroke. "Listen, kid! Big Tom Sommer is entered in that shootin' contest. So's Flash Montgomery. Those two lads are the best shots in the Pecos. If you think you can beat them ——"

"I can!" Dusty huskily interrupted. "I wouldn't be asking a two dollar stake if I didn't know I could win!"

The cattleman thrust back his sombrero and inspected Dusty from head to toe with a look of mingled amusement and scorn.

"Of all the braggin' kids I ever come across," he declared, "you sure take first prize! Son, do you realize boastin' like that just makes you sound foolish or drunk or ——"

"I ain't boastin," Dusty assured him. "I don't have to boast. I can shoot." He swallowed. "I was brought up with a gun. Ever since I was a kid of five I been practicin' shooting a couple of hours every day."

The rancher stared with wavering incredulity.

"Yes, sir, I was just five when my dad first poked a six-gun into my hand and told me to blaze away at a tree. He taught me to shoot so's it'd come natural as walking. I tell you I'll take that prize—and I sure need the money bad, mister! Stake me to two dollars and ——"

Behind Dusty Malloy a low pleasant voice—a girl's voice—said quickly, "Here, cowboy. Get into the contest."

He turned in amazement. He looked at a girl who was slim and erect, whose lustrous chestnut hair poured out from under the brim of a gray Stetson. She couldn't have been much more than eighteen. And Dusty Malloy knew, even in that first glance, that he'd never seen anybody as astoundingly lovely.

She was taking two silver dollars from a pouch that hung from her belt. She offered them to him, but her eyes swerved to the thickset cattleman.

"I heard what he was saying, Dad," she laughed. "I'm willing to gamble two dollars on such confidence."

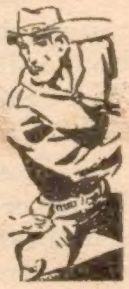
Her father, however, brusquely thrust her hand away.

"You wasn't asked for any money," he snapped, with a note of good humor under his officiousness. He jammed a big hand into his pocket. When he withdrew it, twin coins flashed in his palm. He chuckled, "My daughter's hunches are usually pretty reliable, son. Mind, I think I'm as loco as you for staking you to this entry fee. But if you're half as good as you say you are — well, I've always been hankerin' to see a miracle. Maybe this is my chance!"

He dropped the two silver dollars into Malloy's hand. And Dusty, still staring in amazement at the girl, hardly realized what had happened. Several seconds passed before his wits found steadiness.

"Thanks!" he gasped ardently. "Believe me, I appreciate this more than I can tell you! Give me your name, mister, so's I can hunt you up with your share of the winnings."

The cattleman laughed. "I'm Jeff Peterson. You'll find me around."



Dusty whirled around and ran off through the crowds—a lanky, dust-laden figure who forgot, for the moment, that he hadn't eaten in almost two days. All that mattered now was winning enough money with which to go hunting the Del Rio Kid!

Chapter II. Five Targets.

JOHN C. Daley, the referee—a fat, bald, ruddy rancher with a stentorian voice—raised his arms high for attention.

"The next event, ladies and gentlemen, is the Six-shooter Marksmanship Contest! We have seventy-four experts competing for a prize of a hundred dollars. Among them are some of the best gun slingers in the Pecos!"

He was interrupted by a cannonade of applause. When he established silence, he continued:

"Maybe I better explain how this contest will be run. Behind me, ladies and gentlemen, you see a fence. Nailed to the top of that fence are five wooden squares that look like little picture-frames. Each one will hold a square of cardboard about the size of a playing card. Behind the whole contraption, you'll notice, there's a hill that rises about fifty feet. Any slugs that

don't hit the targets will go into that hill. So everybody is safe, provided he don't stand behind the fence."

Again there was laughter, but the corpulent referee quickly quelled it.

"We'll start this here contest by having every one of the seventy-four entrants take five shots at those five targets from a distance of twenty yards. Anybody who misses one of those cards is eliminated from further trials. Only those who hit all five will be qualified to go on competing for the hundred dollar prize.

"Those men will then step back to a line **thirty** yards from the targets. Again we'll have the same kind of elimination contest. Again only those who hit all five targets will be entitled to stay in for the prize. The'll go back to a distance of **forty** yards. We'll continue in the same way, ladies and gentlemen—except that after forty yards the distance will be increased only five yards at a time. The contest will continue until only one man can hit all five of those targets. In case of a tie—that is, in case the last two contestants each miss the same number of targets on the final effort—the prize will be divided between them.

"Now, if you'll all be good enough to step back behind them ropes, the Six-shooter Marksmanship Contest will begin! The boys will shoot in the order in which they placed their applications. We begin with Buster Collins of the Corkscrew T ranch. All right, Collins! Get back to the twenty-yard line and let her rip!"

Dusty Malloy, one of the seventy-four contestants, was lost in the crowd. From the roped-off sidelines Jeff Peterson and his daughter tried to find the newcomer. But their quest was ended when Buster Collins of the Corkscrew T began to fire.

He aimed carefully. His shots cracked at rhythmic intervals. When he finally lowered his six-shooter, all five pieces of pasteboard showed holes.

The crowd burst into applauding uproar. The referee, grinning, ran to the targets, removed the punctured bits of cardboard, and replaced them with fresh pieces.

"All right!" he yelled. "Next comes Jim Caldron of the Bar C Bar ranch!"

A rangy cow-puncher took his place at the twenty-yard line. He, too, aimed with considerable care—but on the fifth shot he missed. The onlookers laughed. Caldron, however, accepted the derision good-naturedly and retired to the sidelines, holstering his gun and shaking a doleful head.

Dusty Malloy's brows contracted. He **had** to win this! Fifty dollars in his pocket would be a fortune. A grub-stake to resume his man-hunt.

Because he'd been last to put down his two dollar entry fee, he was the last contestant to toe the twenty-yard line. Nobody knew him. The crowd regarded the lanky young stranger with frank curiosity. Somebody said he appeared nervous.

As a matter of truth, Dusty Malloy's nerves were quivering. This was the first time in his nineteen years he'd ever attempted a performance in the presence of three hundred spectators. He suffered a touch of stage-fright. Perhaps that was why he drew and fired so hastily. Shooting from the hip, he allowed himself no time to aim. The five shots cracked so quickly that they might have been the result of panic.

But when he finished, each of the five bits of cardboard was punctured!

The crowd stared at the papers unbelievingly. Then a spontaneous crash of applause exploded from the mob. Dusty Malloy scarcely heard the yells. He was already withdrawing toward the thirty-yard line. As he went he reloaded the Colt .45.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" shouted the referee, lifting his hands. "Out of the seventy-four original competitors there are now eighteen left! Only eighteen who got perfect scores at twenty yards! They're lining up at the thirty-yard line for the second round. Be quiet, please! Here they go!"

Again the same thing happened.

Most of the men aimed carefully, shot deliberately. Most missed at least one card. When Dusty's chance came, he still looked nervous, rattled by the presence of so many spectators. He fired quickly, too quickly to permit true aim. And yet—

"By thunder!" gasped Jeff Peterson, staring incredulously from the sidelines. "He got all five again!"

A man behind him ejaculated, "That kid's a wizard — a regular gun wizard! He don't hardly aim!"

Grace Peterson, who stood at her father's elbow, said nothing. There was a quiet smile on her lips, as if she were congratulating herself on having picked a winner.

The second round left seven contestants. These at once retired to the forty-yard mark. By this time the tension of the spectators had increased to a wild pitch. They were seeing remarkable shooting, and they knew it.

Dusty Malloy, lanky and youthful, looked apprehensively at the six men at his left. He picked out big Tom Sommers—a burly, red-haired cow-puncher whose skill had been talked about by everyone. Next to Big Tom stood another sharp-shooter, Flash Montgomery. These two, Dusty gathered, were the popular favorites.

He gulped, reloaded with anxious fingers.

Big Tom Sommers shot first. With his Colt lifted shoulder-high, he aimed carefully, one eye shut. His bullets flew at slow intervals. He never squeezed his trigger until he was sure of his aim. When at last he lowered the weapon, all five bits of cardboard showed holes.

The crowd applauded, yelled, "That's shootin', cowboy!" Big Tom grinned, nodded, and waved a responsive hand. He retired from the line to watch the others.

The second man missed on his fifth try. The third missed on his very first. Shooting a hole through a piece of cardboard the size of a playing card, at a distance of 40 yards, was no task for amateurs. By the time Dusty Malloy toed the line, he had only two competitors to contend with for the prize—Big Tom Sommers and Flash Montgomery.

The crowd stood hushed.

Dusty raised his Colt. This time he didn't immediately fire. He appeared to steady himself by drawing a long breath. When he did shoot, however, it was without hesitation. Five shots in rapid succession. People were still staring at the hole in the first card, when he punctured the fifth.

Again that spontaneous roar of admiration. As Dusty lowered his gun to reload, the referee bellowed:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the only ones left now are Big Tom Sommers, Flash Montgomery, and a stranger to San Marese—Dusty Malloy! They'll go to the forty-five yard line and shoot from there. And I want to take this opportunity to say that any man who can hit five playing cards at a distance of forty-five yards is doing the kind of shooting you see once in a lifetime! All right, boys! Get back and bang away!"

Again Tom Sommers was the first to face the distant targets. His eyes were narrow. His heavy countenance seemed to have lost color. When he lifted his six-gun he aimed with greater care than ever. He shot slowly—and on the fourth card missed!

"Damn it!" he blurted. He swung away with a disgusted shake of his head. Despite his failure, however, he earned loud applause. But it subsided instantly when Flash Montgomery, blond and handsome, toed the line with his customary smile. Montgomery aimed with an air of nonchalance. He fired—and no hole appeared in the first card!

An expression of bewilderment seized his countenance. He gaped at the referee, at Big Tom Sommers, at Dusty Malloy, as if this thing couldn't have happened to him. There must be some mistake. Perhaps he'd used a blank.

His discomfiture brought loud laughter from the onlookers. After a moment Montgomery himself joined it and ruefully retired

from the contest. Of course, he still had a chance for share in the prize if Dusty Malloy missed.

Dusty stepped to the line.

He gulped hard. The six-gun was in his holster. Instead of drawing it, he rubbed his palms on his shirt to dry them of perspiration. He sent a quick look around the spectators, trying to locate the face of Grace Peterson. But he couldn't see her.

And the referee called:

"All right there, Malloy ! Let's have it !"

Dusty nodded. He drew the six-gun raised it, waited an instant. Then he fired — as rapidly as before. Five quick shots. When he lowered the weapon, there were five holes in the targets!

He holstered his gun. Even before the stupifed crowd began to gasp and cheer, he turned to the referee and asked:

" Where do I collect that hundred dollars ?"

Chapter III. Two Last Slugs.

TWENTY minutes later Dusty Malloy sought Jeff Peterson. As he passed, men slapped his back in hearty congratulation. A few even asked to inspect his six-gun. Dusty scarcely heard them. Walking on his toes, that he might peer over the heads of the throng, he searched for the stocky rancher who had lent him two dollars.

It was near the prize bull ring that he found Peterson.

Dusty promptly stuffed fifty dollars into the cattleman's hand. " There you are," he said simply.

Peterson blinked at the money in surprise. When he lifted his head, he protested, " Looka here, Malloy, I don't want any of this. You won it fair and square. It's yours. You just give me back the two dollar stake."

" Nothing doing !" Dusty refused. " The agreement was we split fifty-fifty."

His eyes were darting about for a glimpse of Grace Peterson. Why he sought the girl, he could scarcely have explained. He wanted another moment with her, and she was nowhere in sight.

" Well, if that's the way you feel about it —" resignedly chuckled Jeff Peterson, and stuffed the bills into his pocket. He squinted at the lean brown face curiously. " Looka here, on," he said in a lower voice. " Where **did** you learn to shot like that ?"

" Like I told you—my Dad taught me. Made me practice two hours a day for thirteen years. You get to know how to aim after a while."

Peterson wrily smiled. " Your Dad," he observed, " must have been quite a gun slinger himself."

At that Dusty forgot the girl and regarded the rancher intently. "Yes, sir!" he softly agreed. "Dad was about the best shot in Colorado—but he couldn't defend himself from buzzards who shot him in the **back!**"

He was about to turn away when abruptly he checked himself. His breath stuck in his throat. He stared unbelievingly, and those who were nearest him saw swift stunned palor flow under the bronze of his skin.

He gaped past the prize bull, through a small clearing in the crowd.

Grace Peterson, smiling brilliantly, was coming this way. But she wasn't alone. At her side walked a tall, elaborately adorned cow-puncher — dark, perfectly proportioned, with jinglebobs tinkling on his bright spurs. His gun-belt glistened with Mexican ornamentation, and his hat band was scarlet. He was exchanging greetings with a rancher at his side, so that Dusty Malloy saw only his profile. But that was enough. He recognised the man instantly.

The Del Rio Kid!

Dusty's heart seemed to explode. Here, with stupefying suddenness, he had reached the end of his quest! Here was the man he'd hunted for three long months—here at the San Marese rodeo!

And then the Del Rio Kid spied Dusty.

He halted. His smoothly shaved countenance seemed to become paralyzed.

Grace, quite unaware that the cow-puncher had halted, continued easily toward Dusty. "Great shooting, cowboy!" she laughed. "I knew you could do it from the way you talked!"

Dusty didn't hear her. Dusty no longer heard anything—not even the noise of the crowds. He saw only the face of the Del Rio Kid—a white, shocked, frightened face.

A husky oath broke from the man. Impetuously he snatched a six-gun from his holster, lifted it.

But before the Del Rio Kid could fire, Dusty Malloy's gun cracked from his hip. A single crash, a spurt of flame. It was a dangerous place to shoot. Had he missed, he might have struck somebody in the crowd. But he didn't miss. He couldn't miss at fifteen feet.

His slug shattered the bone in the Del Rio Kid's right forearm.

The man screamed in pain. He clutched frantically at the wound, shut his eyes. His weapon fell from stiff fingers, and he staggered back against the crowd.

"Malloy!" gasped Peterson, seizing Dusty's arm. "You crazy? Drop it!"

The unexpected shooting wrought instant silence. In the amazed hush people surged forward to see what was happening. They found Dusty Malloy with his six-gun still smoking in his hand, his eyes blazing. Fifteen feet away, his face contorted by pain, the Del Rio Kid nursed a bullet-riddled, bleeding right arm.

Slowly Dusty started forward, his young face grim, savage. He seemed unaware of Peterson's detaining grip. But he'd taken scarcely two steps when other hands sized his shoulders, whirled him around.

He looked into a fleshy face—the flushed face of a man with a dangling gray mustache. The badge of a deputy sheriff glittered on his chest.

"What in thunder is all this?" hoarsely challenged the official. "If you figger you can blaze away high and handsome in this crowd ——"

"Just a minute, sheriff!" cut in the crisp voice of Jeff Peterson. "You can't blame this kid. He shot in self-defence."

"Huh?"

"I saw the whole thing. If Dusty Malloy hadn't blazed away, he'd be sprawling dead by this time. Not that I'm saying anything against Fremont. He—he just lost his head, I reckon."

"What's more," somebody shouted behind the sheriff, "Malloy here could've killed Fremont without trouble! **You** seen the kind o' shot he is!"

The official appeared bewildered. He turned with some idea of questioning the man known as Lace Fremont. But the cowpuncher had miraculously vanished. No doubt some of his friends had dragged him away.

More than a hundred people already milled between Dusty and the man he knew as the Del Rio Kid. He started forward with a groan, realizing that once more the fellow might disappear for months. But the deputy sheriff stubbornly held him back.

"Wait, feller! I ain't goin' to let you tear wild through this crowd. Any grudge you and Lace Fremont have to settle you can settle in private - - - not at a rodeo! What's it all about, anyhow?"

Dusty looked at him desperately. "I can't explain it here, Sheriff. It's a fight between him and me. I - - got to find him!"

"You'll find him some other time."

"I don't know where!"

"Shucks, you can find Lace Fremont any time you like! He just bought the 99 outfit. Reckon he'll be **glad** to welcome you on his ranch," sarcastically.

With a note of eagerness Dusty exclaimed, "Is this 99 ranch far from here?"

At sight of him she straightened in her saddle.

"Seven miles out of town," somebody answered.

So Dusty Malloy lost his first chance at the Del Rio Kid. At least, for the moment. He turned away with a churning mixture of disappointment and determination. Breaking through the throngs, he lost all sight of Grace and her father. He could think of nobody now except the Del Rio Kid.

Then the odors of food assailed him, reminded him that he was famished. He smiled grimly. With fifty dollars in his pocket there was no longer need to go hungry.

As he sought out a tent that served food, he muttered to himself, "I'll get to the 99 Ranch before sundown!"

Two hours later Dusty Malloy rode out of town. People still stared at him. They remembered him, of course, as the winner of the shooting contest. A few who had witnessed the encounter with Lace Fremont also remembered the brief battle. But nobody spoke

to him of it, though the expressions which followed him were uneasy.

The rodeo crowds were already drifting out of San Marese. In less than an hour it would be dark. So Dusty wasn't alone on the trail. He'd obtained directions to the 99 Ranch from a storekeeper, and he loped on in increasing tension.

Occasionally he thought of Grace Peterson and her father. Strangely, he had encountered neither of them during the past two hours. Nor had he seen further trace of the Del Rio Kid.

When he reached towering limestone cliffs painted russet by the late sunshine, he couldn't mistake the fork in the trail. This was the way to the 99. After turning, he rode alone. The farther he went the more rapidly his heart thundered. He knew that at last he was going to meet the Del Rio Kid decisively—and settle what should have been settled three months ago in Colorado.

The trail led over a high ridge crowned by a cottonwoods. And he'd just reached its sage-covered crest when he abruptly reined in, staring.

A lone rider came loping uphill toward him. With a start he recognised her at once—Grace Peterson !

At the sight of him she straightened in her saddle. He waited in breathless excitement he could neither explain nor control. When the girl stopped five feet from him, Dusty drew his sombrero off his disarrayed hair.

" How'dy, ma'am ! I been hankerin' to thank you for —"

" Never mind thanking me for anything!" she cut in sharply. Her eyes were narrow, angry. " Will you tell me," she demanded, " why you shot Lace Fremont ?"

Dusty blinked at her.

" Why," he protested, " he drew iron and would've blasted away at me if I hadn't ——"

" Lace drew only because he knew **you** would shoot! Actually he drew in self-defence!"

To that Dusty Malloy scarcely knew what to answer. It sounded crazy.

" Lace told me about you!" the girl added curtly.

" Told you what?"

" He said you hated him."

Dusty's jaws hardened. " He was doggone right about **that**, Miss Peterson. Reckon I ain't ever had less use for man or snake than I have for this Lace Fremont."

Her cheeks lost all colour. When she spoke again, her voice was icy, her eyes afire.

" Maybe you don't know," she said, " that I'm engaged to be married to Lace Fremont."

"**Wha-at?**"

"So it seems to me I'm entitled to some explanation!"

The news that she was to marry Lace Fremont struck Dusty Malloy as hard as a bullet. It drove the wind out of him. It left him gaping at the girl. Just why he should feel a sudden ache and a sense of wild rebellion, he didn't know.

"Looka here, ma'am!" he began stammering. "You—"

"Why do you hate Lace?" she insisted fiercely.

"I—I suppose he didn't explain that to you?" bitterly.

"He told me only that up in Colorado you were wanted for a shooting. Sheriffs were hunting you high and low. Lace said he happened to bump into you and knocked you cold with a punch. Then he dragged you into town and turned you over to the law. Since then, he says, you've probably had it in for him."

The astounding lie left Dusty Malloy open-mouthed. For a moment he could think of no reply whatever. The real reason for his hatred of Lace Fremont—whom he'd formerly known only as the Del Rio Kid—was so vastly different that he doubted he could make the girl believe it. After all, why should she give credence to his story in preference to that of her future husband? It was ridiculous to think she'd believe the truth.

But Dusty took a chance. He snapped, "There was never a sheriff in Colorado who hunted me! What's more, Lace Fremont never turned me over to anybody. That story is plumb loco! I'm sure hankerin' to face Lace! I don't aim to plug him again. All I want to do is palaver with him."

"You can't!" she told him. "You won't be allowed on the 99 outfit!"

"Who's going to stop me?"

"Lace has ordered all his men to keep you off the spread. If you show up on it, they've got orders to shoot. They've got a **right** to keep trespassers off the place! The 99 is fenced in!"

Dusty twistedly smiled.

"Miss Peterson," he said, "I've hunted Lace Fremont three months. I've travelled hundreds of miles on his trail. D'you think a fence is going to stop me now?" He finished with an abrupt shake of his head. "No, ma'am! Neither a fence nor six-guns!"

With that assurance he tugged on his sombrero, yanked the reins, and sent the mustang leaping past the girl.

"Wait!" she called after him, almost in fear. "You haven't told me **your** side of it! Why do you want to see Lace? What **have you got against him?**"

He looked back at her over his shoulder. Just why he **should** tell Grace Peterson the story, he didn't know. It wouldn't have been so bad in the presence of Lace Fremont, maybe; but

somehow the notion of accusing the man behind his back didn't appeal to Dusty.

He shook his head. "Reckon I'd better leave the explainin' till things have been settled a bit. You wouldn't believe me now, anyhow."

"Why not?"

"If you're engaged to marry Fremont, it'll be hard for you to think of him as a—a rattler and a polecat. Besides, anything I say is bound to cause an argument between us. I'd rather not have it."

Then he nodded and rode on in the direction of 99 Ranch.

For a while, Grace Peterson watched his lanky, youthful figure jogging down the trail. She sat still, biting her lip in perplexity, squinting against the blaze of the low sun. She was still pale, uncertain of herself. She didn't move until Dusty vanished around a bend that carried him beyond a screen of boulders and scrub oak.

Then, an abrupt decision, she swung the white mare around, and followed him.

"There's something about this," she told herself tensely. "I ought to know!"

Chapter IV. From the Back.

WITHIN ten minutes Dusty spied a barbed-wire fence which he assumed to be the boundary of the 99 spread. Just beyond it three unmoving cow-punchers, set against a background of grazing cattle, straddled their ponies and guarded a gate.

Dusty frowned.

"Looks like Lace Fremont figured I'd be coming this way," he muttered. "Probably posted those buzzards to hold me. Reckon maybe I should have come another way."

But he'd already been seen by the mounted men. They sat in their saddles grimly, chins lowered, watching his approach with stormy, hostile eyes. Dusty determined to learn exactly what orders the Del Rio Kid had issued. As long as he remained on this side of the barbed wire, he reasoned, there would be no cause for a fight.

He loped on at a steady pace.

This side of the fence high boulders and scattered junipers lined the trail. It was almost sundown, and the slanting light, pouring out of kaleidoscopic skies, painted daubs of red and purple on the rocks. It was a beautiful sight, but Dusty Malloy was in no mood to appreciate beauty.

Ten feet from the fence he reined in, and sent a narrow survey over the three silent cow-punchers beyond the wire.

"Reckon this is 99 land?" he asked. "Lace Fremont's outfit?"

"It is," snapped one of the waddies. "What about it?"

"I'm aimin' to call on Fremont," quietly said Dusty. "Any law against coming through the gate?"

The three men glanced at one another. One of them evinced a brief, sardonic smile. He sent his horse forward—a big, square-faced waddie with a large bug-like mole on his left cheek.

"Looka here, Malloy," he said bluntly. "We might as well talk cold turkey. Lace Fremont, with a banged-up arm, ain't in any condition to palaver with any visitor. He left orders for us to keep you off this spread."

A bitter smile twisted Dusty's lips. "So he's afraid to face me again, is he? Don't blame him much. He's got plenty reason to be scared."

The heavy faced cow-puncher scowled.

"It ain't a matter of bein' scared! And I don't figure to argue the point. Orders is you can't come through this fence."

Dusty sent a speculative gaze along the barbed wire. Something in his expression forced the cow-puncher to add:

"Listen, hombre! I know you're a fancy shot with that iron. I saw you win the prize this afternoon. But that don't mean you can start an argument against **three** of us. Savvy? No use your lookin' at that fence. If you come over, we got orders to fire!"

Dusty slowly nodded. His right hand rhythmically stroked the wet neck of the sorrel mustang.

"Matter of fact," he began dryly, "I wasn't calculatin' to fight **you** three gents. My argument is with your boss. I aim to—"

That was when he heard the scream.

It was an amazing sound. It ripped through the hot stillness behind him as unexpectedly as a shot. Even before he turned Dusty knew the shriek came from Grace Peterson!

"Look out!" she cried. **"Look out!"**

He was already whirling his horse on its hind legs. At her outcry he instinctively dodged sideward—and not too soon. For as he spun about he saw a chunky man levelling a six-shooter at him from behind a rock!

The man fired.

Flame jutted from the stranger's six-gun, and Dusty's Colt roared from his hip. It was the kind of lightning draw that stupefied even the three riders beyond the fence. They'd never seen anything half as quick. Moreover, Dusty's gun blazed with the accuracy that had won him a hundred dollars.

He saw the chunky man beside the rock drop his weapon. The cow-puncher's hand leaped to his chest, and an expression of horrified, incredulous agony distorted his face. No sound issued from him. He pitched sideward rigidly to crash into sage.

It wasn't until he saw the man sprawling there that Dusty became aware of blood streaming down his own face. He was sliding dizzily out of the saddle. He tried to seize the pommel; tried desperately to steady himself. But it was no use. A fierce, banging pain crashed through his lacerated skull.

He hadn't actually realised he'd been hit by the chunky man's bullet. In the excitement of the moment he'd known scarcely any pain. Only a shock. But now, with a bullet gash across his head, Dusty Malloy dropped heavily into a clump of brush—into obliterating blackness!

When he regained consciousness he didn't immediately open his eyes. He lay limp on his back, allowing his senses to gather into focus. He'd been awake fully five minutes before he raised his lids to survey his surroundings.

To his astonishment Dusty found himself in a bed!

Brilliant sunshine slanted through a window at his left to paint a golden square on the floor. The room itself was neat, its walls white. The familiar figure of Jeff Peterson—thickset, strong of face, grey haired—stood at the foot of the bed. His eyes, narrowed and faintly puzzled, were fastened on Dusty.

"How you feeling, son?" he whispered.

"Why, I—"

Dusty had to check himself. The effort to produce words sent a sharp pang through his head. Wincing, he lifted a hand to discover that his skull was bandaged.

"Take it easy," grimly advised Peterson. "Reckon you'll be all right after a few days."

"Days?" Dusty ejaculated hoarsely. "How—how long have I been here, anyhow? And where am I?"

"You're at my ranch," Peterson gravely informed him. "You been here since last night, when Grace brought you in unconscious. It's now two o'clock in the afternoon."

"By the great tarantula! D'you mean I—"

"No yelling," cautioned Peterson. "Doc Bailey'd throw seven fits if he heard you. He said it was just a gash across the top of your head. No fracture."

"Who—who was the buzzard that plugged me?"

Jeff Peterson frowned out of the sun-flooded window at distant cattle. "An hombre named Lefty Gull," he said heavily. "You got him clean in the heart. He's dead."

"One of Lace Fremont's men?"

"Ye-es—"

Bitterly, Dusty rasped, "Reckon that's the way Lace Fremont always fights—from behind a man. He—"

New sounds in the room made him turn. He saw a bald, leathery-faced cow-puncher whose skin was shrivelled and withered. He was so small that he could scarcely have weighed more than a hundred pounds.

"Come to, has he?" the newcomer asked shrilly.

Jeff Peterson grunted, "Um-huh." To Dusty he added, "This is Squawkin' Si Hammond. He's been playin' nurse to you."

And Squawkin' Si immediately began to vindicate his name.

"Son," he cried stridently, waving a reproving finger, "this here was a right peaceful country 'fore you showed up! I don't recollect a shootin' of any importance for years. Then you pop into San Marese, and inside o' two hours we find Lace Fremont with a bullet-cracked arm, Lefty Gull sprawlin' dead, and yourself with a slug gash creasin' your scalp! Seems to me any honest citizen has plenty reason to complain. You done enough damage to last a lifetime. From now on I aim to watch you doggone close. Any time you reach for a smoke-pole, I'm going to—"

Dusty didn't hear the rest. He jerked up his head and stared in white-faced amazement at the door. Grace Peterson had entered.

And with her—his right arm in a sling—was Lace Fremont, the Del Rio Kid!

"I wouldn't have come up here," Fremont said angrily, "only Miss Grace insisted!"

"I insisted," quietly explained Grace Peterson, looking at Dusty, "because I want to get this thing straight. You feel strong enough to talk?"

Dusty nodded, his burning eyes on the Del Rio Kid.

"Why did you two men fly at each other's throats?" she asked. "And why did Lefty Gull shoot from behind that rock?"

Fremont, glowering, told her, "I had nothing to do with that shooting, Grace! If Lefty Gull decided to take a shot at this critter, it was his own idea."

Grace said steadily, "I'm not arguing, Lace. I want to know, though, why Dusty Malloy has been hunting you? What is it he wants? I think I'm entitled to know!"

Her father, jaws rugged, made no attempt to interfere. He stood aside, his hands clasped behind his back, and watched Lace Fremont intently.

Again, the owner the the 99 Ranch glowered. Resting his left hand on the back of a chair, he looked straight at Grace Peterson and forced words through tight lips.

"I've already told you the story, Grace. Up in Colorado I collared this man when he was being hunted by sheriffs. I turned him over to the law—where he belonged. Last I heard, he'd been sent to gaol. I suppose he never forgave me. Hombres like him carry ornery grudges right through their lives. That's probably why he trailed me down here."

Dusty laughed. He couldn't restrain that laugh. It was harsh, sardonic, furious.

Grace Peterson quickly came close to the bed. "Have you a **different** story to tell?"

"Plumb different!"

"Grace," Lace Fremont hotly expostulated, "if you're going to believe him instead of me—"

"It isn't that I'm going to believe him," she cut in curtly. "But I do want to hear his side of it. After all, when somebody's trailing the man I'm going to marry—trying to kill him—I want to know why!"

Dusty no longer felt reluctant to speak. Lace Fremont's presence relieved him of all compunctions.

"The truth is this, Miss Grace!" he began huskily. "It concerns my father. He was a pretty strange kind of man. Years ago, while prospectin', he struck pay-dirt in a little canyon up in Colorado. He figured if we could hold off a gold rush he could get most of the gold for himself. So he kept things quiet. He built a shack and brought Ma and me out to it. I was a kid of two at the time. Year after year Dad went on pannin' gold from his placer claim. He found quite a lot of it, too. But he never took it into town to sell, except a little at a time. Just enough to pay our livin' expenses. The way Dad figured it—the way he explained it to Ma and me—was that some day, when he had a fortune salted away, he'd take it all and sell it at one clip. He figured he'd take us to some eastern city and live the life o' Riley for the rest of his days."

Lace Fremont coldly interrupted, "If you think we're interested in your family history—"

"Let him finish!" snapped Grace.

Dusty went on: "Dad saved his gold year after year. Most of it he cached in little bags which he kept under the floor of the shack. He was always afraid some day we might have to defend the gold against thieves. That was one of the reasons he made me learn how to shoot. When I was sixteen, he figured I'd better see something of the world, too. So he sent me out, and I meandered from State to State for a couple of years. Finally, when I went back to the Colorado shack to see the folks, I found a sick man in the place."

Dusty's eyes shifted to Lace Fremont. They were full of bitterness, of surging rage. But he said nothing directly to the owner of the 99 outfit. Turning back to Grace and her father, he continued:

"The sick stranger called himself the Del Rio Kid. According to Dad, he'd fallen from his horse into a ravine. Dad found him there, toted him home, and nursed him through a long fever. He kind of liked the Del Rio Kid. Didn't know much about him, though. Dad wasn't the kind of man who asked many questions when a stranger wasn't willing to talk. Anyhow, it seems the Del Rio Kid had been delirious at the beginning, 'fore I came home. From things he'd blabbered, Dad and Ma figgered he probably came from the Pecos."

Again, Dusty sent a baleful glare at Fremont. The man was glowering out of the window.

"The way I sabe it," Dusty bitterly resumed, "the Del Rio Kid must have seen my father cache some of the gold. When he got better he made no attempt to leave the shack. Ma and Dad were kind of glad to have company. It wasn't often they had strangers to talk to, so they didn't hurry the Del Rio Kid.

"One day I took Dad's rifle, and went hunting up in the hills. I was gone about ten hours. When I came home, Dad —Dad lay dead with a bullet in his back. Ma was half crazy with grief. I had to shake her and pour whisky down her mouth before she could talk. Then she told me what happened."

Dusty Malloy paused. His fingers curled fiercely into the bed sheets. When he spoke again, it was in a hoarse whisper.

"Ma said," he grated, "that he Del Rio Kid had plugged Dad in the back! When Dad fell dead, the Kid turned his gun on Ma. She ran screamin' into the canyon. He followed her. He sent two bullets after her, but there were too many rocks in the way. She ran a quarter of a mile. Then she started back. When she reached the shack, Dad was dead. The Del Rio Kid was gone—and so was the gold!"

Dusty lifted his head out of the pillow, and his voice became strident.

"**He** was the Del Rio Kid!" he cried, pointing at Fremont. "I know him! I'd know him anywhere!"

"It's a lie!" Fremont whirled around to Grace, his face mottled and swollen. "I tell you it's a dam' lie! You can't believe a thing like that!"

For an instant the room was dramatically hushed. Then Jeff Peterson, turning to Fremont, quietly said:

"But you **were** up in Colorado, Lace. You got back only two months ago."

"What of it?" defiantly. "Does that mean I murdered an hombre and stole his gold?"

"No-o, not exactly. Still—"

Dusty realised that Grace Paterson was still staring at him in silence. She whispered:

"Is that the whole story?"

"Just about," he said thickly. "After we buried Dad, I took my mother up to Red Rock an' left her with some cousins. She—she was in pretty bad shape. Then I came huntin' the Del Rio Kid—rememberin' he'd raved about the Pecos."

"Didn't you take the matter of the murder up with the local sheriff?"

"Sure. All we could tell, though, was that the killer had called himself the Del Rio Kid. It didn't help much. Posses hunted, but they didn't find an hombre like him anywhere around that part of the country. By the time the sheriff came back, I figured the Del Rio Kid was probably many miles south."

Dusty frowned at the sun-flooded window.

"If you'd send word to my mother that I'm all right," he finished, "I'd sure appreciate it!"

Lace Fremont stood livid.

"Looka here!" he said to Grace, his voice throbbing. "You know I inherited plenty of money! Why should I want to steal from an old couple in the Colorado mountains?"

That was when Squawkin' Si Hammond suddenly came out of his corner. Authoritatively he thrust Jeff Peterson aside, stalked to the bedside. Turning his back to Dusty, he wagged a brisk finger at the others.

"Now listen, all of you!" he rapped out. "Doctor's orders is that this hombre ain't to get excited. What's the matter with you all, anyhow? Lettin' him talk himself into a fit. **I'm** nurse here—an' I say get out! Go on! Get out, all of you! He's talked plenty. If there's more you want to say to him, come back when he's had a rest. Right now I'm carryin' out the doctor's orders. So **vamose!**"

They went—and Dusty enjoyed a full day's rest after that turbulent interview. Just before sundown the next day, however, the new shock came.

A cow-puncher galloped out from San Marese with a telegram for Dusty Malloy.

Peterson brought him the yellow envelope in silence, and Dusty tore it open with nervous fingers. He read the signature first. The message came from his mother's cousins, in Red Rock, Colorado. And they wrote:

"MOTHER DYING. COME AT ONCE!"

Chapter V. The Road to Colorado.

BEFORE they could stop him, Dusty Malloy swung out of bed. He was pallid, reeling. Pushing himself to his feet, he said hoarsely, "I got to go!"

Both Peterson and Squawkin' Si Hammond seized his arms, tried to make him lie down. But Dusty savagely thrust the telegram into Peterson's hand.

"Read it;" he rasped. "I tell you I **got** to go!"

When he'd glanced over the message, the thickset rancher frowned in grave concern, bit his lip.

"I'm sure sorry, Malloy," he muttered. "This—**this** kind of puts a different brand on the whole situation."

"I feel lots better!" Dusty assured him in a cracked voice. "Just let me step into my pants. I'll be all right!"

But Squawklin' Si protested, "Don't be an idjut! You ain't in no condition to go shashayin' from here to Colorado!"

"I don't aim to ride a horse all the way," huskily retorted Dusty. He groped toward the foot of the bed, there to steady himself. "How—how far am I from the nearest railroad?"

"Seventy miles!"

"Where's that?"

"Ute City Junction," snapped Squawkin' Si. "You'll never make it."

Dusty Malloy doggedly shook his head. "I've **got** to make it!" he grated. "I don't know what's happened to Ma, but I—I got to get there!"

Despite his dubious expression Jeff Peterson appeared to agree that Dusty's first duty was to race for Colorado. Nevertheless, as he shook his head, he mumbled: "I don't see how you can straddle a horse for seventy miles."

"I'll do it, I'll do it!" Dusty thickly assured him.

Squawkin' suggested, "You—you ask Doc Bailey first when he comes around in the morning."

"Can't wait till morning," snapped Dusty. He looked around wildly for his clothes. "I got to start now—right away! If you'll give me my duds and my gun—"

Jeff Peterson reached an abrupt decision. Swinging to Squawkin' So, he flung out:

"He's right. If his mother is dying, he's got to travel. He **may** be able to make the railroad, at that. You'll ride with him."

"Me?" Squawkin' widened his eyes.

"Yes! Far as the railroad, anyhow. From there on he'll be all right."

And so it was that half-an-hour later Dusty Malloy, dizzily mounted on his sorrel mustang, rode north with little Squawkin'

Si Hammond at his side. Grace Peterson, her pale face anxious, had wished him luck on the porch. He travelled now with a vision of her lovely, worried countenance looming before him like a mirage.

It was dark. Brilliant stars filled the Texas skies. For a while they moved across the Box JP range, skirting herds of cattle that watched them curiously. Squawkin' said:

"The shortest way is to cut across Pueblo Mesa, then hit through some badlands on the other side. We'll strike open range again after about twenty miles. Think you can stick on that horse through rough country?"

Dusty nodded.

"At that," Squawkin' added more philosophically, "it won't be so bad. There's a trail we can foller all the way."

Dusty didn't speak. He wanted to save his breath and his strength for the long trip to the railroad. His lean face was grey. Because of the bandages that enshrouded his head, he wore no hat. Somehow, as he rode through the starlight, he looked inestimably older than his nineteen years.

It took them more than three hours to cross Peublo Mesa—a high, flat, sandy expanse where patches of sage and cactus fought for dominance. As they followed a crooked trail down into the black shadows of badlands, Dusty thought gratefully of the prize-money he'd won at the rodeo. Almost all of it was still in his pocket. It would pay his railroad fare to Colorado. Without it, he realised, he'd have been quite helpless—unless he'd been able to borrow money.

The trail drew them into a dark coulee. Here they followed the course of a wriggling little stream for a hundred yards until—

A shot crashed ahead of them!

Dusty distinctly saw the flash of flame atop a rock!

He caught his breath, reined in. At the same time he heard a gasp behind him. Jerking his head around, he blinked in horror at Squawkin' Si Hammond.

The shrivelled little cow-puncher's face was contorted by excruciating pain! Both his hands were clasped to his chest, and through the distended fingers oozed a flow of blood!

"Squawkin'!" gasped Dusty.

The word had scarcely burst from him when Squawkin' Si Hammond pitched out of the saddle sidewards to crash on gravel!

Another shot cracked through the stillness. Dusty's mustang heaved under him so violently that it all but flung him out of his saddle. As the horse reared, he jerked out his six-gun. His face was pallid. From the corners of his eyes he saw blood streaming from a gash in the mustang's flank.

Dusty waited for no more. He swung out of the saddle, flung himself prostrate behind a rock. His horse, squealing in pain, reared again and bounded off with a pathetic limp.

Dusty didn't look at the mustang. With blazing eyes he gaped back at the motionless figure of Squawkin' Si Hammond.

"Squawkin'!" he whispered. "Squawkin'!"

There was no answer. He knew, with a sudden stab of agony, that the shrivelled old waddie was dead. Nobody could survive a bullet wound in the centre of the chest—over the heart.

Gun in hand, he turned to stare in the direction of the shots. His whole being pounded frantically. His mind whirled in chaos.

Who was ahead, or how many men, he couldn't know. He crouched behind the rock, breathing heavily, his finger crooked around the trigger. Whatever happened, he suddenly realised, he had one advantage. He was probably a much better shot than anybody among the boulders ahead. If only he could catch a glimpse of those dry-gulchers—

Dusty waited tensely. His head was throbbing again. He had a terrible fear that in swinging off the mustang he'd evoked another flow of blood from his scalp wound.

But he couldn't think of that now.

Exactly what all this meant he didn't even attempt to guess. He was in a desperate predicament—that was all that mattered. Ahead of him, hidden among those boulders, were dry-gulchers. His only chance was to see them—to shoot it out with them.

Cautiously he peered around the edge of the rock. To his amazement he saw a figure boldly rise some fifty yards away. The man was a dark shadow in the night—an unrecognisable bulk. He came forward deliberately, gripping a gun. And as he advanced he turned his head to call loudly.

"Come on, gents! We got them both!"

Dusty jerked up his six-gun. He didn't immediately fire. At that instant he saw other shadows loom up in the darkness. Altogether he discerned four. They were widely scattered. Each, apparently, had been hidden behind a rock of his own selection. Now they converged toward him.

His face lost all colour. He squatted there, one man pitted against four. His only advantage, he knew, was his skill with a six-gun. He'd need it now!

And then he recognised one of those four men.

Recognition brought a gasp, widened his eyes. He blinked at the farthest of the figures—a man momentarily revealed in starlight—and knew it was Lace Fremont!

"Damn him!" blurted Dusty; and in a wild flash of inspiration he comprehended everything.

The telegram about his mother must have been a trick!

Something printed in San Marese—a message written on a yellow blank! It had been Lace Fremont's way of luring him out of the Box JP house—of bringing him here into the badlands, alone, where he might be killed and remove from further consideration. Fremont, talking to Grace, must have learned Dusty had written to his mother. Acting on the knowledge, he could have written and sent the telegram with his own messenger, ostensibly in reply to the letter.

Dusty Malloy's heart throbbed furiously. Perspiration streamed from his forehead to drip down his ashen countenance.

"I've got just one chance!" he told himself fiercely as he watched the oncoming figures. "Got to shoot fast! If I can plug all those hombres before they can dive for shelter, I'll be all right!"

He thought of the marksmanship contest at the rodeo. There, at a distance of forty-five yards, he'd punctured five playing cards. If he could shoot as straight now, getting these four men before they could jump for shelter.

But it was going to be infinitely more difficult than hitting cardboard targets. For one thing, these hombres were so widely scattered that he must change his range in shooting at each of them. Nevertheless, it had to be done.

Dusty held his breath. The nearest of the four men was now some thirty yards away. He lifted the Colt—and began firing. Four quick shots. Four jets of flames that spurted in four directions. His gun cracked so rapidly that he might have been fanning it. A gun wizard?

He saw the nearest man collapse with a cry of pain. He saw the second pitch sideward, his gun flung out of his hand. He had an idea that he nicked the third man, though the fellow dodged while he shot. The fourth—Lace Fremont himself—had time to plunge behind a boulder before a bullet whizzed past the spot where he'd stood.

"Only two out of four!" groaned Dusty, in despair.

Actually, though he didn't know it, he had hit three men. Two lay dead with bullets in their hearts. The third squirmed on the ground with a slug in his abdomen. The only one who had managed to escape completely was Lace Fremont himself—and Lace, with his right arm still in a sling, wasn't a serious opponent.

Fremont crouched behind a rock, his countenance pallid in terror, his nerves tremulous. Incredulously he thought of his three companions who sprawled ahead of him. It was the first time in his life Lace Fremont had seen such speed with a six-gun. He could scarcely believe the sight. His left hand grasped a weapon, but it shook so violently that he knew he was helpless.

Lace looked around in desperate uncertainty.

And some fifty yards from him, in the darkness ahead, Dusty Malloy crawled out from behind his rock. He went as far as the body of Squawkin' Si Hammond. He took Squawkin's six-gun from its holster. It was fully loaded. Gripping a weapon in each hand, Dusty crawled forward like a monstrous lizard.

Exactly what he'd encounter ahead he couldn't foresee. But he was ready to shoot it out; this was the show-down!

"Only thing is," he grated to himself, "I can't **kill** that Fremont buzzard till I know where he cached Pa's gold!"

Chapter VI. Persuasion.

DUSTY remembered precisely where Lace Fremont had dived for protection. Toward that spot he wriggled steadily, indomitably, with two six-inch guns in his hands. Flat on his chest, he passed the man he'd killed first—a sprawling figure in the darkness. A moment later he saw his second victim.

Staring at them, Dusty gulped. This was like crawling through a patch of hell.

His head ached and pounded fiercely again. If the scalp wound had begun to bleed, that presented a new danger. What if loss of blood should weaken him? Should leave him unconscious? But he wrenched the fear out of himself.

Pushing on, he suddenly heard a sound at his left. A groan. Dusty stiffened, and his brows contracted over flaming eyes. Cautiously, inch by inch, he dragged himself toward the moan.

A moment later he saw the man he'd plugged in the abdomen. who the fellow was, he didn't know. A stranger—but doubtless a 99 cow-puncher. He lay writhing, his hands pressed to his bleeding stomach. After watching him a few seconds, Dusty grunted. It wasn't **this** man he had to worry about now. It was Lace Fremont—the Del Rio Kid!

He pressed on.

His temples pounded madly. The rock beyond which Freman had plunged was scarcely twenty yards away. With his burning eyes fixed on it, Dusty went on and on.

Of a sudden he saw a hand grope around the side of a rock —a hand that grasped a six-gun! Apparently Lace Fremont was risking a shot.

Both guns in Dusty's hands roared simultaneously.

Even as they spat flame he heard a scream of agony The hand at the rock vanished. It had been a target a little larger than a playing card—and again his wizardry hadn't failed him. He'd **hit** Lace Fremont's left hand! He heard the man's gun clatter on stone.

Dusty sprang to his feet, stumbled forward, glaring with viciousness that promised death.

He found Lace Fremont floundering behind the rock, his wounded left hand dripping blood.

Pallid of face, Fremont looked up in horror. Dusty Malloy stood swaying over him, both his weapons levelled at the Del Rio Kid's head. A bitter, savage smile twisted his lips.

"So," he said hoarsely, "you decided to wipe me out o' the picture!"

Fremont didn't speak. He breathed heavily, his teeth gritted as if to crush the pain of his hand.

"You first killed Squawkin' Si Hammond," said Dusty grimly. "You forced me to kill a couple of your hands and to wound a third. Your idea **didn't** turn out so good."

In a choked, cracked voice Lace Fremont began, "Listen, hombre—"

"**You** do the listening!" Dusty cut in harshly. "Right now you ain't fit to fight even a worm—if a worm would take the trouble to fight a yeller-spined buzzard like you! Your right arm's no good, and your left hand's busted. Ordinarily, I'd hate to take advantage of a man in your shape. But you ain't a man, Fremont. You're just a snake!"

The terror in Lace Fremont's countenance was hardened by a surge of rage. He flung out, "You can talk brave, all right, when you know I can't handle a gun!"

Dusty went on as if there'd been no interruption:

"You don't deserve the consideration any other hombre might ask. You sure didn't give my Dad any. After he'd seen you through fever and sickness, you deliberately plugged him in the back. Robbed him. When you've done things like that, Fremont, you got no call at all for consideration. That's why I don't aim to take any notice of your condition."

"What—what are you goin' to **do?**"

"I'm going to do to you what you did to my Dad. Kill you."

Lace Fremont gasped. He looked around in panic, as if seeking help where he knew there could be no help. When he stared up at Dusty again with feverish intensity, it was to blurt:

"You can't just plug an hombre who's—"

"Listen, Fremont," Dusty broke in tautly. "If I have to shoot you where you sit, I'll do it—and I won't feel any the worse for it. As it happens, though, I'm more interested in getting Dad's gold back for my mother than in pumping you full of lead right now. So I'll give you a last chance. Either you talk pronto and tell me where you cached that gold, or you can say your prayers."

"I tell you—"

"There's only one thing I'm interested in hearing you tell **Where's the gold?"**

Waiting for a reply, Dusty levelled his six-shooter straight at Lace Fremont's chest. His face was hard, forbidding, utterly without mercy. His fingers stiffened on the trigger, and Fremont must have seen the movement. He recoiled in terror, his whole body trembling.

"For the love of heaven, Malloy! I tell you I never—"

Dusty fired.

As the gun crashed there was a light tinkle on the gravel. Fremont looked down in a daze. He saw one of the jingle-bobs shot off his spur.

"That was just to show you," grated Dusty, "that I still got my aim. The next slug will hit much higher, somewhere in your chest. How about it? Are you going to tell me?"

"I—"

"I'm giving you thirty seconds to talk," Dusty grated. "Where's the gold?"

They remained motionless, staring at each other through an interval of desperate silence. The seconds passed swiftly. Dusty's six-shooter pointed its black bore straight at Lace Fremont's heart. There was something ghastly, almost spectral, about him as he stood there, tall and lean, with a bandage shrouding his head.

"Last chance!" he suddenly rapped out. "Either you tell me now or—"

"It—it's cached in my barn!" exploded Fremont.

Dusty's heart bounded.

"Where in the barn?"

"I got a workshop rigged up in—in the back corner! It's under the floor-boards there!"

Dusty's chest thundered with ecstatic triumph, but his countenance remained relentless. As he nodded he muttered:

"I see. You didn't have the nerve to cash in on any that gold so soon after my Dad died. You didn't want to be tied up with his murder."

"What—what you aimin' to do now?" cried Fremont.

Dusty's eyes thinned.

"I'm going to take you to your barn," he said. "If we find the gold there, I'm going to turn you over to the sheriff. The fact that you had that gold cashed will be enough proof, I reckon, or your murderin' my Dad. Besides, I'll bring my mother down here to identify you." He paused. "But if we **don't** find the gold in your barn," he warned wrathfully, "I'm going to load you full o' lead! Come on! Get up on your legs, and walk!"

"I—I don't know if I can, Malloy," huskily.

"You'll have to! Where'd you leave your horses?"

Lace Fremont jerked his head backwards. "Up there. Under some cottonwoods."

"All right. Let's go. We'll use them. An' by the way—you wrote that telegram, didn't you?"

Still gaping in terror at Dusty's weapon, Lace Fremont nodded as he forced himself to his feet. He leaned weakly against a rock. His head had stopped bleeding, but it was clotted red. He looked at it dazedly a while; then, lurching away from the boulder, he started uphill.

Dusty, gripping his guns, walked at his side.

And so it was that neither of them saw the man on the ground behind them. It was the cow-puncher whose abdomen had been punctured by one of Dusty's bullets. He lay there, aiming carefully from a clump of sage. Perspiration streaked down his congested face. Perhaps he knew he was doomed. Perhaps he wanted, as a last gesture, to kill the man who'd shot him.

He aimed very carefully.

Somehow he couldn't suppress the shaking of his hand. It quivered uncontrollably. He cursed as he tried to draw a bead on the lanky figure of Dusty Malloy. But the muzzle of the gun swung from left to right.

At last, in sheer exasperation, he fired.

Dusty heard a gasp from the man at his side. In amazement, he gaped at Fremont. He saw him lurch forward, his eyes fiercely shut. He saw him pitch to the ground—with a bullet in his back!

"What in blazes!" he gasped.

Guns raised, Dusty whirled around. The effort of shooting appeared to have exhausted the cow-puncher in the darkness. He sprawled flat now, unconscious.

But it wasn't in him that Dusty Malloy was interested. Chest pounding, he dropped to his knees beside Lace Fremont. He rolled the man over on his bullet-pierced back. He stared dazedly into the colourless, agonised countenance.

Almost five minutes passed before he realised that the Del Rio Kid was dead—shot by a bullet in the back, just as Dusty's father had been killed.

It was four days later that Dusty Malloy's mother, sitting on the porch of a ramshackle house in Red Rock, Colorado, read a letter from her son. She stared at the scrawled words with stunned, incredulous intensity. A small, grey-haired woman, she blinked when she finished the note, looked around as if to assure herself she was indeed awake. Then she read it again. Dusty had written:

"Dear Ma.—I found the gold, all right—practically all of it, I guess. Found it in a barn. It's ours now. Also, the Del Rio Kid is dead.

"I'd like to come sashying right up to you, Ma, but I have a slight wound which opened again the other night, and I've been kind of weak since then. The folks over here at the Box JP ranch—especially Grace Peterson—are looking after me till I get stronger. Meanwhile, Grace said to ask you to come down. There's plenty room for you, and they'd like to have you. I was thinking, Ma, that this might be a fine country for us to settle in. Now that we've got enough money to buy a little outfit, it might be a good idea to try raising cattle. Besides—shucks, I might as well tell you the whole truth!—I'm hankering to stay close to where Grace lives. Write me whether you can come down yourself. If you can't, I'll come for you soon, as I feel stronger.—Love,

"DUSTY."

"P.S.—Remember how you always used to scold Dad for teaching me how to shoot? You were wrong about that, Ma. Dad sure had the right idea! A man can never hope for a better friend than a six-gun. I found that out here in the Pecos.

"Got to stop writing now. Grace just came in with my supper. She's a swell girl. **Adios!**—D."

THE MAN WHO RODE "PURGATORY."

BY CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER.

LOOKING out of the ranch house window, Sid Tucker, Manager of Lazy J, saw a hundred miles of sand and dust, hot, dry, and shimmering in the white glare of the sun that shone down from an empty sky. Between the ranch house and the ragged sky-line was an emptiness that suggested interminable space.

The Manager had never been able to discover beauty in the picture, and yet for fully five minutes he had given it his undivided attention. Presently he turned to the young man who stood just inside the ranch house door, garbed in an exaggerated Western costume; beardless, leanfaced, with eyes that hinted at a grave innocence strangely blended with the boldness of youth. "And so you want to work for Lazy J?" he asked, as though the idea had occasioned deep surprise.

"I reckon that's why I asked you," returned the young man, easily, without changing his position.

Tucker's lips tightened. It was said of Tucker, that this tightening of the lips was no indication of the trend of his thoughts.

In the present instant, he might have been amused or displeased. He held no reputation for levity.

Ten minutes before, when he had seen the young man slide from his drooping cow pony, flinging the reins over its head, and stride into the ranch house with boldly whizzing spurs, Tucker's mind had run on a long journey into the past. That was why he had kept the young man waiting.

"I don't remember," he said, abruptly, "that this here outfit has ever advertised to break in tender-feet."

From under his shaggy eyebrows, Tucker watched furtively to see how the stranger would take this unmistakable slur. Except for the slight stiffening of the body and a faintest trace of a smile, the young man gave no sign of feeling. "I don't remember that I asked you to," he returned, almost tenderly.

In spite of the softness of the tone, there was a cold note somewhere. Tucker's lips tightened again.

"Where do you come from?"

"Springville."

"Why, that's Baggett's ranch," he said coldly.

"Sure. I thought you'd know." There was a complacent enjoyment in the tone.

A Typical Story of Life on a Ranch.

Tucker made a second inspection of him. He was tall and well set up. The leathern chaps which had especially aroused the Manager's ill-concealed scorn had seen hard wear. But there was a wide-brimmed hat—too wide for the cow-puncher who had been in the country long enough to appreciate modesty of dress—and the two guns—sagging over each hip—that were more of a drag than a convenience, except when a man was adept for their use. "I expect you know Baggett's foreman?" Tucker inquired. abruptly.

"Dave Barry? Sure."

"Humph! And you worked under him!"

The young man smiled dryly. "Couldn't have worked at Baggett's unless I did," he said. Tucker glared with cold unbelief. "Know a fellow over there named Webb Ball?"

The stranger nodded. "Sure, you know him?" he returned.

"Heard of him," was Tucker's answer. "Bronco buster. Barry told me he was a regular dare-devil at breaking horses. Said he was plum quick with a gun, too, but never looked for trouble," he half smiled at the young man. "Just now we could use a man like that."

"Gun-man?" said the stranger, dropping his words slowly.

Tucker's eyes flickered with a tremulous humour. "No!" he said, with decision; "that kind is too dangerous for this locality Might buckle up against Deveny, our range boss; he's some quick with a gun, too. But we're short a bronc' buster. Got some horses that Satan himself wouldn't risk his neck riding. 'Purgatory' is the worst of the lot. I'd sure like to see Webb Ball try to ride him!" There was a whimsical note in his voice. His eyes met the stranger's. "Now, if you was Webb—"

"I am Webb Ball," said the latter, quietly.

Tucker fairly spluttered. Then a blush slowly mounted his face. No man likes the sudden humbling of his pride of judgment.

"I've heard about this 'Purgatory' horse," continued the stranger, unmoved by Tucker's ejaculation. "Some of the boys over at Baggett's say as how he can't be rode. I can ride some," he stated, with the calmness of perfect confidence in his own ability, "and I reckon I can ride this 'Purgatory' horse."

TUCKER'S eyes cooled with slow decision. "You can work here," he said, presently; "and you'll ride horses when you're told. And if you ain't the man you say you are—"

"Don't!" said the stranger. And his lips curled and whitened.

Tucker laughed. "I reckon you're no false alarm," he said. "Go over to the bunk-house, and tell Deveny I've hired you."

"Thanks," said Ball. He stepped outside the door, and then, returning, stuck his head in.

"If it's just the same to you," he said, quietly, "I'd just as soon you wouldn't advertise that I'm from Baggett's."

There was in the manager's mind a desire for enlightenment, but he reflected upon the peculiar notions of the average cow-puncher, and smiled with indulgent sarcasm.

"You see," continued Ball, "I wouldn't want the boys here to know that I came over special to ride 'Purgatory.'"

And, not waiting for an answer, he walked to his pony, tucked the reins under his arm, and led the animal to the corral. Tucker watched him as he let down the bars and replaced them: watched him as, with his saddle on his shoulder, he strode unconcernedly toward the bunk-house.

"He's either a conceited son-of-a-gun, or he's the Simon Pure article," reflected the manager. He watched Ball until he disappeared through the door of the bunk-house. "Anyhow," he concluded, summarising his thoughts, "he's the first man that ever had me guessing."

Down in the bunk-house at the edge of a cottonwood clump the Lazy J outfit was performing its ablutions preparatory to sit-

ting down to dinner. A score of eyes were on Ball as he threw his saddle on the ground outside the door and entered the bunk-house. There was the welcome aroma of steaming coffee and the savoury scent of fresh cooked beef. Several of the men were already seated at the long table when Ball entered.

No one showed any surprise, but many eyes met in suggestive squints. Like Tucker, they knew the significance of extra broad brims and leathern chaps.

"I'm looking for Deveny," said Ball.

At the extreme end of the table a tall man rose from a chair, peering through the steam-laden atmosphere at the newcomer.

"Well, what do you want with him?" he demanded, brusquely.

Ball swung slowly on his heels and faced the man.

"If you are Deveny," he said, quietly, "I want to tell you that Sid Tucker has hired me. I'm going to work here."

Following this matter-of-fact announcement, there was a sudden movement at the end of the table. A chair grated on the floor, and out of the obscuring steam clouds came the tall man, shuffling slowly toward the light of the door.

"I'm Deveny," he said, shortly.

He came closer, his attitude one of contemptuous insolence. Folding his arms across his great chest he eyed Ball with evident disfavour. He appeared to be making some pleasing mental calculations, for his eyes slowly closed to a quizzical squint and his lips curved cynically.

Suppressed curiosity was everywhere. Eyes that had previously been filled with a glazed unconcern over the monotony of things now brightened with interest as their owners crowded closer to see the stranger. Speculation ran riot in every man's mind, but with the gentle consideration that Western etiquette teaches, they forebore speech. Some of them stood with folded arms, their freshly brushed hair plastered over their heads with extravagant precision; others—not yet prepared for the table—poked their tousled heads into the room through the open doorway.

THE stranger had said that he was going to work for Lazy J. But was he? Much depended upon how Deveny decided. As range boss for Lazy J, Deveny had lived well up to his reputation for downright meanness.

"And so Tucker has hired you?" said Deveny. He contrived to give his words a venomous twist that made them almost an insult, and he swept his insolent gaze slowly up and down Ball's figure.

"Tucker is sure mighty careless who he hires," he added.

Fifteen of the sixteen men in the bunk-house would have resented Deveny's words with an equally insulting retort; fifteen of the sixteen expected the stranger to do the same. If he did not he would, without further question, be placed among that small number of human weaklings known to the cow-puncher as "Yellows"—which, being interpreted, means cowards. And so in breathless silence they waited for the stranger to "show his hand."

"I told Tucker I wanted work mighty bad," said Ball, apology in his tone.

Deveny's eyes flickered tremulously. Behind and around him healthy lungs sighed in process of deflation. Interest in the stranger has now become largely negative. Several of the men sought their chairs at the table, grinning contemptuously. Deveny placed his hands on his hips, and rocked back and forth on his heels.

"Yes," he said, shutting one eye at Ferguson, the straw boss, "you look as though you need work mighty bad. Had 'em long?" he questioned, suddenly.

"What?"

"Them guns and that hat," returned Deveny. He laughed around the circle of faces. "Never saw but one hat like that before," he declared, with a slow drawl, "and that was back in Chicago—before I came out here. Saw it in a store window, surrounded with belts and guns and bowies—like no man ever wears. If you expect to work here you'll get a respectable hat. You hear?"

The men waited expectantly to hear the stranger's reply to this second test. Then when Ball answered simply, "Yes," they smiled expressively into one another's eyes, and sought their places at the table. Deveny returned to his seat at the extreme end in scornful silence. Ball stood beside the open door, staring about uncertainly. Several of the men snickered. From that moment fifteen of the sixteen men ignored Ball's very existence, giving their attention wholly to their dinners. Ball found a seat beside the Sixteenth Man.

"Deveny's a bad one," suggested this personage, addressing Ball, while throwing cover glances at the range boss. He might have been about Ball's age, and he was a rugged looking man, but there was that in his eyes that told of timidity and indecision.

"I wouldn't take no job here," he suggested, in a significan undertone.

Ball caught his glance. "Why?"

THE Sixteenth Man hesitated. He awaited his chance before replying. "Well, for one thing," he said, finally, "Deveny

didn't take a shine to you, and no man can work here if Deveny don't like him."

"That all?" questioned Ball, as the Sixteenth Man hesitated again.

"No. You ain't game."

For the slightest instant Ball's face paled and his lips twitched with a sudden hardness. Then he stared straight before him with expressionless eyes. He took several sips of coffee from his tin cup before he replied.

"Then you think Deveny will make things interesting for me?" he questioned.

"Interesting?" The Sixteenth Man's voice was pregnant with unspoken sarcasm. "Say," he added, "are you a fool, too? Can't you see that he don't want you?"

Whether Ball could "see" or not, he contented himself with allowing the Sixteenth Man to guess what his reply would have been had he spoken. But the Sixteenth Man had prophesied correctly. Deveny had not taken a "shine" to him. The range boss manifested this in many ways, taking advantage of the broad licence given him by Tucker, who never interfered with him in his method of handling the men.

Ball had been hired to break horses, but for three weeks after his first appearance at the bunk-house he laboured long days in the irrigation ditches, alone, under a sun that swam in a dead sky; while the other men, on their way to and from the range, smiled comprehensively and sent subtle jeers at him. But he laboured patiently and diligently at the digging, and if Deveny thought to discourage him from remaining at Lazy J he must secretly have admitted his failure. And he accepted the range boss's sarcasm in much the same manner that he accepted his place in the ditches.

Then suddenly one day Deveny called him from a ditch and assigned him to a place in the cook-house. His duties there were to wash dishes and to perform such other menial service as the autocrat of the bunk-house directed. The first meal dished up to the outfit by Ball was made the occasion of hilarious, but subdued, jollity. Allusions to the "tenderfoot biscuit-shooter" failed utterly to shake Ball's unfailing patience. Scraps of conversation overheard by him, including such phrases and terms as: "Yellow's two guns" (which he wore always), and the "waggoner's hat" (which Ball still wore in spite of Deveny's profane admonition to procure a "respectable" one), and "scairt cuss," passed unnoticed or were accepted with slowly whitening lips and smouldering glances.

A week after his advent at the bunk-house Deveny managed to overturn a tin of coffee upon Ball's hand as he attempted to

reach over the table. For an instant Ball stiffened, and his eyes flashed ominously. Then he smiled wanly, and apologised to Deveny for his clumsiness. The men of the outfit knew Deveny, and they snickered into their plates over the incident. For the next week Ball went about his work in the bunk-house with his hand bandaged.

Apparently the Sixteenth Man sympathised with him. "He's bound to get you," he said to Ball. "Sooner or later you'll find his insults too much, and you'll try to pull your gun on him. And then—"

"What?"

"Then you'll die quite sudden, and the boys'll plant you over in the hills."

But evidently, judging from Deveny's manner, it was not his intention to goad Ball into drawing his gun. If this was his intention, he concealed it with consummate skill. It was apparent, however, that he took pleasure in placing Ball in such positions that he appeared a ridiculous figure among the men of the outfit. Besides, having the reputation of being a gun-fighter, Deveny might have hesitated about picking a quarrel with the inoffensive Ball, for while the men of the outfit were quite willing to laugh at the young man, they might have resented his being forced into a gun-fight that would end in his death. The Sixteenth Man communicated this to Ball one night after supper.

"The boys know Deveny is after you, and while they're not admiring you any, they're going to see that you get a square deal." The Sixteenth Man was surprised that Ball showed no signs of appreciation.

Then one morning about a week later Deveny entered the bunk-house while the men were at breakfast, and Ball was pouring coffee. The range boss's manner was one of domineering insolence.

"Well, sonny, how do you like cooking?" he asked.

Ball did not look at him as he replied: "It's a heap better than breaking horses."

THE range boss meditated, frowning at Ball's averted face. Then he smiled with inscrutable humour. "You don't like to break horses, I take it," he said.

"That's so," assented Ball. For the first time in many weeks he smiled.

Deveny grinned around at the men. "We're going to round up a bunch of mavericks to-day, and I reckon you'll go along."

Half an hour later as Ball was tightening the cinches of his saddle, Deveny came up to him.

"You won't ride that skate!" he sneered, indicating Ball's pony. "Show him 'Purgatory'!" he ordered, speaking to the

Sixteenth Man. Deveny grinned maliciously as he departed for the manager's office.

"Thunder and blazes!" exclaimed the Sixteenth Man, white-faced, to Ball. "'Purgatory's' a devil; a lightning bolt on legs! There ain't a man in the Territory can—"

"That him in the corner?" interrupted Ball, nodding toward a slant-eyed, mustard-coloured pony that had kicked a clear space around him in the corral. The Sixteenth Man made an affirmative sign. Ball was already unslinging the coiled rope that hung from the pommel of his saddle. The Sixteenth Man stepped over to him and laid a detaining hand upon him.

"Don't try to ride him," he said, and his tone was almost a plea. "He'll kill you like he did that other tenderfoot that came out here two years ago. He was only a kid, and Deveny made him ride 'Purgatory'—and 'Purgatory' killed him. No man has ever tried to ride 'Purgatory' since. And now—"

"What kid?" questioned Ball, brusquely.

"A boy named Malone," said the Sixteenth Man, tenderly.

"The kid ought to have known better," declared Ball, with sudden gruffness. He turned and watched the range boss, listening meanwhile to the Sixteenth Man, and still working to uncoil the rope from the saddle horn.

"Shucks!" said the Sixteenth Man, with reproving heat. "You didn't know the kid, or you wouldn't talk that way about him. Any of the boys would have went to hell for him. I can't forget what he did for me." The Sixteenth Man's voice softened.

"What did the kid do to Deveny that Deveny made him ride 'Purgatory'?" questioned Ball, his face averted.

The Sixteenth Man cursed softly.

"What did you do to him that he wants you to ride him?" he flared back. "Nothing, I reckon. Only Deveny didn't like him any more'n he likes you! Showed it the same way, to. Gets both of you to ride 'Purgatory.' And 'Purgatory' killed the kid, and he'll kill you!"

"Maybe," said Ball, shortly. He shook out his lariat and climbed the corral fence, making his way slowly toward the pony. A bridle trailed from his left arm.

THE Sixteenth Man leaned against the fence, prepared to extend his sympathies to Ball when the latter should return—defeated. The Sixteenth Man knew that "Purgatory" had a reputation for evasion that extended throughout the Territory. Several of the men, ready for the trip to the range, rode up to the corral bars and halted to watch Ball's defeat. They said no

word, but exchanged eloquent glances. They had all had their trial with "Purgatory."

But Ball wasted no time in false movements. Holding his rope low, so that it almost trailed the ground, he approached within fifty feet of "Purgatory." Then while the watchers marvelled at his apparent carelessness there was a sudden swish, a dust cloud as "Purgatory" sensed the impending danger, a struggle—and "Purgatory" lay prone in the dust, his head held down by Ball.

The Sixteenth Man took down the corral bars, and in awed silence watched Ball lead "Purgatory" forth, the bridle securely adjusted. Then the Sixteenth Man replaced the bars and held "Purgatory's" head while Ball placed the saddle upon him. "Purgatory's" efforts to prevent the tightening of the cinches were fruitless, for the swift and sure movements of this new man took him by surprise.

After a moment he stood flat-eared and vicious, trembling with rage and fear. In two years no man had dared offer him this indignity, and his moment of indecision was given over to a distracted horse expression.

In that moment Ball had sprung into the saddle. At that moment also, Deveny came out of the manager's office—the manager following.

"The crazy fool!" said Tucker. "If I had known he was going to try and ride 'Purgatory'—"

"My orders," interrupted Deveny, curtly. The eyes of the two men met—Tucker's wide with a slow-dawning comprehension Deveny's cold and level under his shaggy eyebrows.

"It's murder!" declared Tucker, hoarsely. He was white to the lips. He was thinking of the day Ball had come to him. That meeting had aroused a slumbering sentiment which had developed into something almost like affection for Ball.

Deveny laughed evilly. "Yes," he drawled, "'Purgatory's sure a man-killer."

The manager said nothing more, but came away from the door of the ranch-house, and stood silent, his eyes smouldering with a deep fire, watching Ball and "Purgatory."

"Purgatory" had been only astonished when Ball had tightened the cinches; he was stunned when he felt the man's weight on his back. But only for a moment. He required only this small space of time to realise that his arch enemy—man—was again brazenly attempting to conquer him. Then, his brain afire with the man-hatred of his wild ancestors, he squealed with almost human rage, and flung himself erect, standing dizzily upon his hind legs, pawing the air frantically. Finding the man unshaken. he bucked. A dozen times he sprang wildly into the air, coming

down with arched spine, his four hoofs bunched, his head well down, his thin nostrils distorted with a snorting terror.

But Ball sat in the saddle, swinging his lithe body cleverly to "Purgatory's" eccentric movements, rising in his stirrups when "Purgatory" bunched his feet upon the ground, goading the animal sharply with his spurs when it launched its body into the air, and twining his legs around it when, with head down and heels in the air, it attempted to pitch him out of the saddle, head foremost. Sitting on the top rail of the corral fence the Sixteenth Man ceased mumbling a crude prayer, and sat erect, suddenly aware that prayers for Ball were quite superfluous; evidently he had ridden "Purgatory's" breed before.

"By the Lord!" exclaimed Tucker, at this instant. "He can ride!"

Deveny grinned maliciously. "Old 'Purgatory' has got some other tricks that he'll try before long," he said.

"Yes," observed Tucker, triumphantly; "that's one of them!"

"Purgatory," coming down with a prodigious buck, had suddenly rolled. This was accomplished by striking the earth with his forelegs unjointed and stiffening his hind legs at the moment of impact. But evidently anticipating this move, Ball had flung his feet free of the stirrups, landing lightly on the earth beside "Purgatory," and was using his heavy quirt with merciless vigour. "Purgatory" snorted with surprise; this spectacular performance had usually been enough for the ordinary rider.

NEVER had he been forced to undergo the humiliation of a whipping when he had attempted it. Hard driven, stung by the heavy lash that took him upon all sides, "Purgatory" scrambled wildly to his feet, intent on escaping his tormentor. Before he had taken two steps Ball had vaulted lightly into the saddle again.

"Whoope-e-e!" yelled the Sixteenth Man, from his position on the fence. And then, in a lower voice, and reprovingly, "And I told him he wasn't game!"

Again feeling the weight of his adversary, "Purgatory" whipped around the broad level between the cottonwoods and the ranch-house, wild-eyed, desperate, making abrupt plunges, swerving with sudden, side-stepping jerks, rearing so far back that an inch more would have sent him crashing down. Still his enemy clung to his back with certain, unshaken determination; still the sharp spurs reminded him that his ancient enemy was supreme.

It was the most terrific time of "Purgatory's" life. He had been accustomed to seeing his enemy from the inside of the corral; the corral fence had been the line that had separated him from

the two-legged animal that he feared and hated. And heretofore, when they had attempted to sit astride him he had disposed of them quickly and finally. But now here was one of them who could not be displaced, who clung to him as though perforce he was a part of him; who, when he reared, flung himself free from the stirrups and made ready to lash him with the cruel quirt, and when he would arch his back would rise easily with him and at last settle firmly into the saddle to ply the torturing steel.

"Purgatory" halted suddenly and gathered himself for a supreme effort. As his sinews trembled on the verge of action he heard his enemy's voice, taunting him:

"Buck, will you, you red-eyed devil? Well, buck then! Buck!"

Half set for a plunge, "Purgatory" snorted with anguish as the sharp spurs cut into his blood-flecked flanks and rose in the air with a squeal of rage and pain as they sank in again. He had no thought of bucking now; his one great desire was to get away from the tormenting pain of the rolling points of steel that tore incessantly into his sides.

The men of Lazy J saw the victory, and they yelled hoarsely as "Purgatory," driven to desperation for the first time in his life, surrendered to the masterful riding of his enemy, and fled out upon the plains. The men of Lazy J kept their gaze upon the dust cloud that enveloped horse and rider until both disappeared from view in the distance. Then they drew together, eager-voiced and communicative. There was not one of them but saw the darkness that had settled over the face of the range boss.

HALF an hour later "Purgatory" trotted into camp, his head drooping, his red nostrils shrilling the air into his exhausted lungs, the foam of exertion reeking from his sides. Upon his back Ball rode nonchalantly, smoking a scornful cigarette.

The men still lingered about the corral fence, and Tucker saw Ball's triumphant approach from the window of the ranch-house. He smiled with satisfaction. From a window in the bunk-house, Deveny also saw "Purgatory's" subjugation and he cursed with an abandon that startled the cook into overturning the coffee pot.

When Ball took his place beside the Sixteenth Man at the supper table, the atmosphere of the bunk-house was vibrant with expectation. Tucker came in before the meal was finished, sitting down at the table with the men—a most unusual thing. Lazy J had sized up the stranger—and had made a mistake. Therefore the men of Lazy J expected developments. But nothing occurred until the meal was finished. Then in reply to a question put to

him by the Sixteenth Man, Ball spoke. His voice was clear and sharp—every man of the outfit heard it and paused to listen.

"It ain't much to ride a horse like "Purgatory," especially if you've got an object in view. I didn't think of riding a horse—any kind of a horse—until two years ago—this Fall past. I was down in Sacramento then, and I heard that my kid brother had been killed riding a horse that had a reputation as a man-killer. I don't think the kid knowed much about riding a horse, but he had a way about him. He wouldn't let no man run him. In that respect he was like me." He paused and looked at the expectant faces of the men, turning his eyes finally toward Deveny.

"I've heard that the man who got him to ride the horse that killed him didn't like him any too well. I've heard that this man took a dislike to the kid and got him to ride the horse to get rid of him. It was after this news came to me that I took to riding horses. I wanted to show that range boss that the kid's brother could ride his horse.

"I'd heard of this 'Purgatory' horse over at the place where I work, and I came over special to ride him. I reckon you saw me ride him," he said, without boast. He smiled with peculiar sarcasm, continuing coldly:

"I reckon even the range boss will be able to ride 'Purgatory' now."

The slur was deliberate and intentional. It brought Deveny to his feet, cursing. All the men at the table, as if by some mysterious telepathy, became aware of the intending crisis. Two or three left the table, others shoved their chairs back and seemed to crouch in them. The Sixteenth Man shuddered, turned pale to the lips, and huddled back against the wall. Only Ball, nonchalantly rolling a cigarette, seemed undisturbed. Yet his eyes, cold with enigmatic purpose, were fixed on Deveny.

The range boss smiled evilly from the end of the table. As he leaned forward his right hand fell upon the butt of his pistol, and he spoke with discordant venom.

"Take that back, you——"

Deveny had his pistol half drawn, but from somewhere about Ball's shirt there was a flash of metal and, instantaneously, of fire. A cigarette—unrolled—fell to the table. And then Deveny sighed, placed both hands to his chest, and pitched forward upon the table slipping presently to the floor.

Ball, his back to the wall, a pistol in either hand, covered the men of the outfit.

"Up with your hands!" he commanded sharply; and don't you move—none of you!" His eyes sought out the Sixteenth Man.

"You saw him try to pull?" he questioned, coldly.

The Sixteenth Man took a step forward—white-faced. "I reckoned we all did," he said. And then, admiringly, "But you was plum quick!"

"It was a square deal," said Tucker. "I reckon Deveny wouldn't have been so reckless in trying to draw his gun if he'd known who you was."

Ball smiled curiously at Tucker. "I reckon you don't know either," he said quietly. His eyes swept the faces of the men.

"My name is Malone," he said. "I had a brother out here two years ago, and Deveny made him ride 'Purgatory.'"

GUNPOWDER HERITAGE.

BY OLIVER KING.

Chapter I. The Hawk.

IT was a trap—a frame-up. The man called the Chicken Hawk knew that the instant the lawman with the shotgun rose up behind the counter in the bank. He dove for the floor, shouted a needless warning to Pecos Jack, and rolled as the scattergun exploded deafeningly.

As he rolled, the Colt in the Hawk's hand flashed up and barked once. The deputy dropped the shotgun on the counter

and grabbed, groaning, at a shattered shoulder. But the Hawk groaned, too. For out of the corner of his eye he saw that Pecos Jack had taken the buck-shot meant for him in the chest.

Rage flared hot in the Hawk, and changed him for an instant into a deadly killing machine. The Colt flipped level again, and this time steadied directly on the deputy's pain-twisted face. "You darned murderer!" the Hawk muttered as his thumb released the hammer. Pecos Jack had been the best partner a man ever had—white, clean through to the gizzard. A man—not a coyote to be murdered from ambush!

Something hit the Hawk a heavy blow in the side as his six-gun exploded. The slug went wide by inches. That would be the sheriff, a gun in each hand, coming out of the inner office. The Hawk had seen him, but he had been too bent on killing the deputy to pause to protect himself just then.

The shock of the bullet steadied him, cleared his brain of the anger which obscured it. "Out!" he yelled to the third owl-hooter, who stood near the door. That man sent a slug into the head of the teller who had grabbed for a Colt under the counter. Cursing, the Hawk drove lead at the sheriff's gun-arm and jumped through the door, not three paces behind his partner who had killed the teller.

Men were boiling out of the inner office behind the teller's cage as he lunged through the door to a street which also seethed with blazing guns. Up the street he saw the thin figure of Kane Bisbee dart into the alley-way where the horses waited. Funny! Bisbee must have started for them even before the first shot was fired. For the affair in the bank, despite everything that had happened, had taken only a matter of seconds. Still, maybe he was wrong. . .

Kirby, the man who had shot the teller, went down, writhing. The Hawk knew from the way he fell that he was a dead man—just as he had known Pecos Jack was dead, even without the final glance he had given him before he started for the door.

Kane Bisbee was already mounted. He did not wait for the Hawk, but whirled down the alleyway to a back street and drove for the country to the south of town. The Hawk followed, swearing. That was the wrong direction. But he supposed that Bisbee had noticed, as he had, that the bulk of the crowd was toward the other end of town. Chances were that they would have been cut off if they had ridden that way.

The Hawk rode with his mind whirling and his heart in his boots. During all the years he had raided down from the mountains, this had been the first time that anyone had been killed during one of his hold-ups. But his chagrin over the death of the teller was over-shadowed by his grief at the loss of Pecos Jack.

He was glad, though, that Sheriff O'Brien's slug had kept him from killing that deputy. He had lost his head unreasonably. What had come to Pecos Jack was the risk they all took. Better to go out on the hot end of a gun than to stretch rope.

He overtook Kane Bisbee, who asked, "What happened to Pecos?"

"He took a load of buckshot that was meant for me," the Hawk told him grimly. "You was in plenty hurry to fan the breeze, wasn't you, Kane?"

For a split second, Bisbee's eyes gleamed, then shadowed, expressionless, he answered: "I run to bring up the horses as soon as I heard the first shot. That's what you want a lookout for, ain't it?"

The Hawk made no direct reply. "That thing was a trap," he said. "There was a leak somewhere."

By the Strength of His Two Hands and the Sweat of His Brow, Young Buck Bellew had Gained for Himself an Honourable Reputation, a Fertile Ranch, and the Girl He Loved. Yet, in One Dark Moment, All that was Swept Away, and He had to Make the Bitter Choice Between the Honest, Comfortable Life of His Dreams, or the Harried Years and Death-Filled Trails Which were His Grim Blood-Heritage.

"Bud Kirby was in town the other night," Bisbee pointed out. "He might have got liquored up and spilled somethin'."

The Hawk nodded in silence. His mind was preoccupied with the problem of escape. A posse was tearing out of town behind them. The way they rode led straight into Comino County, and for reasons of his own the Hawk could not cross the county line. Bisbee could, and once up in the hills, he'd have no difficulty in throwing the posse off his trail. But the Hawk, to reach safety, would have to circle north, and there was no way to do that in this open country without being seen and cut off.

They hit the high country and dove into Lobo Canyon. It put them out of sight of the posse, trailing half a mile behind by now, for the first time. A plan began to form in the Hawk's head.

"Listen, Kane," he said. "You know where Lobo Creek dives into the ground in that box canyon they call the Lobo's Grave? Nobody'll be expectin' either of us to go in there. I'll go in while

you go on. You slow up on the slope just past there until the posse gets in sight of you. You'll be out of range, but the sight of you will lead them hell-for-leather past the box canyon entrance. Once you're over the rise and into the Comino Hills you'll be safe. It'll give me a chance to ride out behind them an' cut north, see?"

Again that transient gleam was in Bisbee's eyes for a fractional second. Then he nodded. "You'll be takin' a chance," he said casually after a minute. "How come you don't ride over into Comino with me?"

"I don't go into Comino County," the Hawk told him shortly. "You know that."

Bisbee shrugged. "Have it your way," he said indifferently.

The Hawk flashed him a glance. He had not missed that gleam in Bisbee's eye either time. The Hawk had the kind of eyes which, without appearing to look particularly hard at anything, rarely failed to note everything which edged into their field of vision. He had an unpleasant impression that the gleam had been one of satisfaction when Bisbee had heard of Pecos Jack's death, but he had put the idea aside. So far as he knew there had been no grudge between the two men.

NOW, he had the same uneasy sense—that Bisbee was pleased at the idea of his running into a blind canyon. He remembered how quickly the thin outlaw had gotten to the horses. Remembered, too, that there had been a leak. . . . His mouth under the grizzled moustache tightened, and instinctively his hand dropped near the butt of his six-gun. If he found that Bisbee had betrayed them. . . .

But that was unlikely, too. What could he gain by it that would be enough to compensate him for the risk he himself had to run? He put the whole thing out of his mind. He couldn't see any way out of this tight corner except by flight into that trap which was known as the Lobo's Grave. He would be betting his life on Bisbee's good faith, but it was a gamble that had to be taken, and the Hawk never wasted time worrying about necessary risks.

They came to the place where Lobo Creek brawled down from the hills and broke into the canyon which bore its name at a point where a gentle down-slope enabled it to run a short distance up-canyon until it swirled off into the box where it disappeared mysteriously from view. The entrance to the blind canyon was a mere border of rock and dirt between a high wall on the one side and the boiling rush of the stream on the other. The Hawk turned in, while Bisbee went on.

Inside, the canyon spread out, like a great, unroofed hall which boasted only one door. All around the smooth rock walls

ran up sheer, forty or fifty feet; while behind the mountain came down in a great curved cliff which was almost as straight up and down as the canyon walls themselves. The Hawk thought grimly that his rear could not have been better protected. A cool-headed climber might possibly get up that cliff, at the risk of his life, if there was any way to get up the smooth canyon walls, but nobody would be likely to succeed in the almost impossible feat of getting down it to attack him in the rear.

No, he had only to fear attack from the entrance. He smiled at himself ironically at that thought. Attack was not what he had to fear, but discovery. Once a posse bottled up the entrance he would be trapped, utterly. It would be merely a question of selling his life as dearly as possible. There would be no chance of escape or of waging a successful fight.

He held his mustang near the entrance, out of sight of the canyon outside. He waited. It was not long before he heard the pound and ring of the posse's hoofs on the canyon floor.

Breathing a little more quickly, he waited for the shout which would tell him that they had glimpsed Bisbee on the upper slope, and would go by the box canyon entrance at a high lope. But no shout came, and his ears told him that the posse was riding now at a trot. Evidently it had given up hope of overtaking the two outlaws before they reached the county line.

"Hey! Hold a on a minute—here's tracks!" The voice came from just outside the entrance, and the posse slowed up.

"Hell, they wouldn't go in there," another voice spoke up. "That's a blind canyon. The Hawk's too wise for that."

"I dunno," another cut in, "he was hit. I drilled him myself. We better take a look-see."

That would be Sheriff O'Brien, the Hawk told himself. Well, if the sheriff asked for it, he could have it. He had tried to avoid killing always—he who was wanted for murder!—but darned if he'd hang for any man! He was going out in gunsmoke, and that meant that somebody was going to get hurt. He only wished that momentary bitterness that he could get to that skunk Bisbee for five seconds before he died.

Somebody was coming into the entrance carefully, on foot. The Hawk crouched behind some brush and waited, six-gun in hand. The man eased around the corner, Colt levelled, eyes searching the canyon warily. The Hawk grinned a little, and, following a habit which was so old that it had become almost an instinct, shot the gun from the sheriff's hand.

With a muffled exclamation, O'Brien darted back out of sight. His Colt dropped into the stream and disappeared from view. After a moment, he called out: "You might as well come out—you can't get away."

"You might as well go away," the Hawk told him with grim humour, "because you sure can't get in."

Chapter II. Gun Messenger.

THE Hawk made his way to a clump of rocks and brush at the rear of the canyon where Lobo Creek plunged into the bowels of the earth. There under an overhang of the canyon wall, was the strongest position he could take. It gave him a clear view of the entrance and protected him from even the chance of an attack from the rear. He left his horse free to graze, but took the Winchester from the saddle boot.

Hunkered down behind his natural fort, he examined his wound. The bullet had struck his side slantwise, cracking a rib and making a nasty furrow in the flesh. Barring the chance of infection, it was not much to bother about, but he had lost a lot of blood and felt weak and a little sick from that cause. He bound it up as well as he could. There would be no attack, he felt sure, while the daylight held, but when dark came, they'd be at him from all sides. So he set himself to wait for nightfall—and for death.

He had still four hours, he judged from the lowering disc of sun—four hours in which to remember, to regret and to live over in restrospect the hard, dangerous days of his life. Anyway, he reflected with grim satisfaction, his son would never know. He had been smart about that, anyway, by God! There was a man up north a ways who, when he heard the news of the Chicken Hawk's death, would invent a death for Jim Bellew, prospector, and send word to the boy. The kid could live clean, free from the shadow of his father's life.

There were only three men in the world who knew the Chicken Hawk's real identity—the man up north, the sheriff of Comino County, and Cole Potter. The first two he could trust, the third might be a risk, but he did not think it a great one. Potter had nothing to gain by breaking his word, and might lose a good deal, even after the Hawk's death. Besides, with the man up north to lie for him, Potter wouldn't be believed.

To young Buck Bellew and to the world at large, Buck's father was Jim Bellew, honest and sometimes successful prospector. He could have no connection with Jim Andrews who had become the Chicken Hawk, even if anybody ever found out that the Hawk **was** Jim Andrews. The Hawk had even spent a lot of time actually prospecting, between his spectacular swoops down on the low country towns, in order to give colour and reality to his son's belief in him. He himself had never come into Comino County, where Buck Bellew had first punched cattle, and then,

with the money his father had sent him, become a rising young ranchman. He had always contrived to have the kid come to see him, on the rare occasions when he had seen him at all. The boy had actually seen him working his claims—little claims that he had bought from successful prospectors as part of the scenery for the part he played.

It was an irony of fate that that impersonation in the end had made him richer than any of his robberies ever had. He actually had found gold in the end—had taken out a fortune in the last few months. Honest money, from the earth itself. He grinned torturedly at the idea that he had been about to pull out after just this one last job—leave for the Argentine to spend the rest of his life as an honest man. He had hoped that the boy might want to come down and join him. They could work out a new destiny shoulder-to-shoulder, as he had once dreamed they would do in Comino County when the kid had been no more than a chubby little button, with gold in his hair which was worth more to Jim Andrews than all the yellow metal which had ever been taken out of the earth.

Well, that hope was ended. No doubt he had been a fool to think that he could escape the final penalties which wait for all the riders of the Owl-hoot Trail. Pecos Jack had not escaped. And thinking of that, Jim Andrews, who was the Chicken Hawk, was almost glad that his own time had come.

The sun slanted down, touched the canyon's rim. Swiftly, the shadow thrown by the opposite wall ran out, like the fleeting shadow of death itself, until its edge lay on the rocks behind which the outlaw lay. Wearily, weak from the loss of the blood which dripped steadily through the rough bandage, he reached for his Winchester, and moved over to the very edge of the stream. If he were shot here, he would almost certainly fall in. And a body which fell into Lobo Creek where it rushed into the earth was not likely to be recovered for any sort of identification.

By some curious freak of geological formation, the stream reappeared nowhere. It rushed into the cavernous fissure in the canyon bottom like something mysteriously and fiercely bent on its own destruction, as though it wanted to quench its being in the fires at the earth's centre. And men said that it did just that, for at times the waters seemed to boil back and gusts of steam billowed up from the fissure's mouth.

Its hissing, fluid rush would make a fitting grave for a character which had had, after all, no real existence on the earth. For in that moment, the Chicken Hawk seemed the mere ghost of an outlaw to Jim Andrews—

a part played, on a stage without reality. As the sun sank, the courage in him sank, too. He had an impulse to slough the Chicken Hawk off for good, with all his theatrical deeds and trappings, and to step out before those men who waited outside the canyon entrance in his own character—as Jim Andrews himself. For what seemed real to him in that moment were the years before, when he had borne that name with pride and hope. Even the part he had played as Jim Bellew, prospector, seemed more real to him now than the Chicken Hawk did. And he wondered at the old bitterness which had driven him into such a role. It ought to be possible to become himself again—to explain. . . .

But then he gathered himself together. The Chicken Hawk had one more part to play before he disappeared—there was to be one last act still, with the guns painting orange flowers in the dusk and the snarling chunk of the lead searching for the springs of his life. He set himself carefully along the rock edge, with the rifle out before him, and waited. . . .

IT was a fiesta. Young Buck Bellew stood on the porch of his ranch-house and looked out over the grassy valley which formed his Bar Double B spread. Then he looked down, grinning happily at the girl at his side. For the moment, the crowd was letting them alone. It was wholly occupied with the news one of the late arrivals had brought—the news that the Chicken Hawk had been caught at last; was holed up, wounded, in the Lobo's Grave just across the county line. Details of the bank robbery, the escape of one of the robbers, the trapping of the Hawk, passed from lip to lip in a buzz of excited conversation.

"You don't look as though you cared whether the Hawk was caught or not," Netta Carruthers told him, returning his grin with a smile as happy.

"Why should I, when—" Buck's grin widened.

"I think all you care about is just to stand and look at this old ranch of yours."

"Ours," Buck corrected. "But Netta, that's not all I care about."

The girl cast down her eyes. "Thanks," she said. Then she looked up at him mischievously. "I have to work pretty hard for my compliments to-day, don't I?"

Buck asked severely, "You trying to get yourself kissed right out here on the porch. I might have known. . . ."

"Have I ever been particular—with you?" she laughed. And then dodged deftly when he almost folded his arms around her.

Then Buck became aware that Ed Carruthers was looking at them, and he grinned amiably at him. The old sheriff returned his smile stiffly, before he turned away.

Sheriff Carruthers had had a funny expression on his face. Buck thought—something not quite readable. Oh, well, he was getting used to funny expressions on the face of Netta's father. Once he had seemed almost like a second father to Buck, but that was before he started paying court to Netta. The moment that happened Sheriff Carruthers had grown unaccountably cold to him. He had in fact done everything, but forbid Buck the house.

Buck knew that the old lawman would never have consented to their marriage except for the fact that Netta, on her twenty-first birthday, had announced that she was going to marry Buck, whether her father gave his consent or not. Sheriff Carruthers, who knew something about his daughter's determination, had evidently thought it wiser to give in with an appearance of gracefulness. He thought of his wife, whom he had loved deeply. . . . And he remembered her determination. . . .

Thinking of the sheriff reminded Buck of his own father, and his face clouded a little. "Wish the old coot was here," he said to the girl at his side. "I like him, as a real gent—even if he is my father!"

"I do, too, Buck," she told him gently. "It seems odd to think of him being off in the mountains, prospecting and not even knowing his son is about to be married. You think he'll like me, Buck?"

"Hey-y!" Buck protested. "After what I chose, you don't think I'd have an old man with bad taste, do you? You wait until you see him—he'd do to ride the river with, that one would."

Tall, lean-hipped, broad-shouldered, with a square jaw under steady grey eyes, Buck looked as though the same remark might apply to him. Evidently the girl thought so, for she said, "You'll do to take along yourself, I reckon."

"Look," Buck told her, grinning and pointing to a buckboard which had just driven into the yard, "there's the sky-pilot. You're takin' **me** along, gal, for a long time. I hope you realise it."

THE girl looked up at him with eyes suddenly serious. "For better or for worse, Buck," she said softly, "'til death do us part."

But the arrival of the parson had drawn the attention of the crowd back to them, and their moment of privacy was ended Somebody yelled, "Stand quiet to be hitched, you two."

"Come out an' take a last drink, Buck," somebody else called, "before the lady has a right to bawl you out of it."

In a holiday mood, owing to the kegs of beer and the cooking smell of the two fat yearling steers which had been roasting over the barbecue fire since dawn, their guests crowded up to the porch, joshing and hoorawing.

Cole Potter, paunched, with hard, round, shrewd eyes over a bulbous nose and flowing black moustache, made his way to the porch and bowed ceremoniously over Netta's hand. His arrival stilled the hubbub. The crowd, realising that it was witnessing drama, fell silent, watching.

Potter had been Buck's rival for Netta Carruthers' hand. His suit had been no secret, nor had the open unfriendliness between him and Buck Bellew. But no consciousness that his presence might have been uncomfortable appeared in Cole Potter's manner. He said something conventional to Netta. Then he turned to Buck, putting out his hand.

"I reckon there's no need for me to say how much I congratulate you, Buck," he said.

Buck's eyes might have betrayed some of the astonishment and distrust he felt. It wasn't like Cole Potter to be a good loser. But more than that, the man had an air of not being a loser at all. Buck could have sworn that there was something like triumph in the sardonic black eyes which fixed themselves on him.

He took Potter's proffered hand, though he made no attempt to keep the irony out of his tone as he answered, "No, I reckon there's no need."

"Your marriage is kind of sudden, isn't it," Potter asked, with an overtone of mockery in his voice, "I didn't hear about it until a few days back."

"Sudden to everybody but us," Buck agreed dryly.

"Well, anyway," Potter told him jovially, "I'm glad I was able to get here in time for it." He turned away and went over to shake hands with Ed Carruthers.

People watched that, too, for it was common knowledge that the old sheriff had been as unfavourable to Potter's suit, despite his wealth, as he had been towards that of Buck.

Buck himself watched the big ranch-man's back with narrowed eyes. There was something here he did not understand. Instinctively, he didn't like it. But after a second he told himself that he was imagining things. If Potter had been up to anything with him he'd have done it long ago. The man had obviously hated him for years, yet he had never made the slightest move to force a quarrel or to do Buck any harm whatever. And that in itself was puzzling, for Potter was big enough and powerful enough to make of himself a dangerous enemy. Other people who had fallen a-foul of him knew to their cost that he was both tough and tricky, yet he had let Buck strictly alone. Sometimes the younger man had been tempted to think that Potter was afraid of him, but that seemed unlikely, too.

"Now, what's he so greasy about?" Netta inquired in an undertone. "Looks like snake oil wouldn't melt in his mouth."

Buck did not reply. He was looking at a rider who had come up unnoticed, and was dismounting near the corral.

Chapter III. Buck Rides Out.

HE was dust-covered, and his horse was hard-ridden and lathered. The man, having ground-tied his mount, turned toward the house.

Netta Carruthers noted that he was a thin man, with a face like an axe, and that he wore two guns tied low on his thighs. He came into the crowd and asked for Buck Bellew. When they showed him to the porch, he said in an ordinary tone which nevertheless gave an effect of coldness and harshness, "I'd like to talk with you private."

Buck hesitated. Netta could see that he did not like this man, and that he was near to telling him to talk out. Buck had no secrets. But after a moment, he walked out into the yard and back toward the corral with the man.

Netta saw the man talking to Buck and Buck's face flushing with sudden anger and disbelief. Then her strained ears heard Buck's voice, raised, "You lie, you slab-sided coyote!" He stepped toward the man with his fists clenched.

The thin man's right hand flicked, fast, and with such economy of movement that it seemed not to have moved at all. But Netta saw that a gun was in it, held in close to the hip, and that the man's face was cold with warning.

She glanced about her, but no one in the crowd had noticed, apparently. It was her position at the end of the porch which gave her the vantage point to see and hear what they could not.

Frightened, she slid a slender leg over the railing, and jumped to the ground. She did not cry out; it was Buck's business, and he would not have liked it. But she wanted to get to him as soon as possible.

But before she had covered half the distance she saw the thin man had put his gun away, and was talking again. Buck's face had the oddest look on it she had ever seen. In the end, the thin man said something curtly, and turned to his mount. An instant later, he was disappearing at a trot, with Buck looking after him blindly, like a man who has a sudden inner version of hell.

Buck appeared to have no consciousness of Netta's presence at his side, and for a long moment she remained silent, a little awed by the harsh bitterness in his face.

She touched his arm. "What—what is it, Buck?" she asked anxiously.

He looked down at her almost absently. Then her face, her presence, suddenly seemed to get through to him, and he laughed. The sound was abrupt, harsh.

"Is—is anything the matter, Buck?" she asked worriedly.

"Not much," he told her, "just that our marriage is off."

She didn't even feel stunned; only puzzled. What he said was too incredible for belief. "You're joking," she told him.

"Jokin'?" he burst out bitterly. "I wish to God I was! I wish to God this was only a nightmare, and that I'd wake up from it!"

The passion in his tone made her feel suddenly soberer than she had ever felt. "What is it, Buck?" she demanded steadily. "Why do you think our marriage is off?"

"I can't even tell you," he said, as though that constituted a grievance almost as deep as the thing which was worrying him.

The girl was silent a moment, trying to get her mind to take it all in. Then she said decisively, "You can't do that to me, Buck—I don't deserve it. You'll have to tell me what's wrong. You owe me that."

She could see that that shook him. After a moment, he said. "You're right. But I'll have to ask you not to tell anybody—even your father—for twenty-four hours. That's a go?"

"Yes."

He took a deep breath, and then spoke like a man measuring every word and feeling all the weight of it. "I've just found out that the Chicken Hawk is my father."

SHE stared at him for a moment as though he had gone crazy, but she suppressed all the foolish, unnecessary exclamations that surged up in her mind.

"Are you sure, Buck?"

"It's what that ranny said," he told her. "Somehow he made me believe him."

She said thoughtfully, "I don't see why he would lie about it."

"It checks up with a lot of things—now that I think of it," Buck agreed sombrely.

"Of course, you know this doesn't make any difference to me," she told him, putting her hand on his arm warmly. "How can it stop our marriage?"

"You don't get it," he said, his face wooden. "The old man's in a jackpot. I've got to go help him. Before sundown I'll be outside the law myself."

She caught her breath. "Oh, no, Buck! You can't do that," she protested violently. "There's no use in it. You can't help him."

"I got to try," he said stubbornly.

"Did that man come here to ask you to do that?"

"He was lettin' me know, so I could."

"Why isn't he helping him, himself?"

"He said that maybe his own neck wasn't so healthy."

"He's not doing it because he knows it's impossible," she flared. "You'd be a fool to go. There's no way to get a man out of that place. If your father had wanted you to do anything like that he wouldn't have taken so much trouble to fool you and keep you straight."

"That's just it," Buck said. "He's stood by me every way he knew how. I used to think maybe he didn't like me much, but I can see now that it must have been kind of tough for him. I got to stick with him now."

"You'd be a fool!" the girl cried furiously. "It's a trick—that's what it is. That man knows you can't help him. He just wants to get you into trouble."

"He's picked a good way, then," Buck said sombrely. "But why would he want to get me into trouble? I never saw him before in my life."

The girl beat her closed fists against the air, frantically. "Oh!" she cried aloud. "What can I do—what can I say?"

Buck's features twisted once as if in a torment of physical pain, but after that brief flash they became wooden again. "I got to, Netta," he repeated.

"Listen," the girl cried out passionately. "Can't you see it's a trick? I bet it's something Cole Potter is doing to you. It is! I'm sure of it. That's why he looked so nasty and—and pleased with himself. Are you going to let Cole Potter make a fool of you?"

Buck looked at her queerly. "Maybe you're right," he said.

"Of course, I'm right!" Netta said triumphantly. "I can see through him like he was tissue-paper!"

"Well," Buck said grimly, "that's one favour he's done me, anyway."

The girl stamped her foot. "Favour!" she blazed at him. "Do you call it a favour to ruin your whole life—and mine? Don't I mean anything to you? What about me?"

Buck Bellew's mouth whitened, and sweat suddenly beaded his brow. "Don't!" he muttered. "Don't do that to me, Netta."

Netta's eyes flashed, and her lips grew firm. "If you do this to me, Buck," she said, "it's because you don't love me."

"You know better than that, honey—it's just that—well, I got to, that's all."

"Buck Bellew, if you leave this ranch to-day—break up our lives to do this foolish thing, I'll—I'll never see you or speak to you again."

Buck looked at her a long while, then he said, "I reckon I'm not blamin' you, Netta, but—I'm goin'!"

White-faced, eyes blazing, Netta turned on her heel and walked back toward the verandah. Buck stared after her a moment, then he motioned to one of his hands. "Throw my pack on the roan," he said, "and saddle up that blaze-faced sorrel. Try to keep anybody from noticin'. I'm goin' up to the house. Hold 'em out back behind the bunk-house. I'll be out in a minute."

He avoided the crowd, conscious that he was being eyed curiously, and went into the house by a back way. In the kitchen he gave brief directions to the cook for a pack of grub, then went into his own room, got into chaps, buckled on his six-gun and took a Winchester down from pegs on the wall. He stood still, looking around him a long moment, thinking of the house that was his and the spread he had built—of what life might have been like, with Netta Carruthers at his side. Then he went out to where the horses waited behind the bunk-house.

Half way there he remembered that he had forgotten the grub. He turned around, and saw Cole Potter standing at one side of the house. The ranchman was standing with his hands on his hips, laughing silently. He broke off when Buck turned around, and walked back toward the front of the house.

Chapter IV. Call of Owl-Hoot Blood.

THE Hawk caught a movement outside the canyon entrance, and sent a shot winging near it. The movement became more violent as a posse-man who had become too impatient, jumped for cover.

It was still light, though the canyon was a pool of shadow. From his position the Hawk could see a section of the mountain, still golden red in the last rays of the sun. It would not be long now.

Up somewhere behind him, faint, a shot cracked out. Jim Andrews' ear told him that it was a Colt which had spoken, so he knew at once that nobody was trying to shoot at him at that range. He wondered what it was. More out of idle curiosity than anything else, he moved forward to the shelter of some rocks ahead which would give him a view of the cliff in back. There was still plenty of time to get back to the position from which he meant to shoot it out.

On his back he searched the rimrock above for some signs of life, but there were none, and the shot was not repeated. He was about to crawl back again when the figure of a man appeared suddenly, outlined against the sky, and began to walk along the top of the cliff looking down. Evidently, the man, whoever it was, managed to make out Jim Andrews' form lying in the shadow

of the canyon, for the figure suddenly swept off its sombrero and waved it. Jim Andrews frowned. There was something familiar about that form up there—a kind of unconscious grace and swagger in the walk. It reminded him . . . He swore suddenly aloud. But, of course, it couldn't be!

The man began to climb down the cliff. At first, the Hawk supposed that for some reason of his own he wanted to get down a little way, and would soon stop. He watched curiously to see what the fellow might be up to. But whoever it was up there appeared to have no intention of stopping. He kept coming, slowly, picking his way as the cliff got more and more nearly perpendicular. Then he stopped for a long moment, looking down. The watcher could not tell whether he was hesitating or merely picking his way. Then deliberately the figure turned its back and began to come down the really steep part of the cliff. The Hawk caught his breath and swore admiringly. Whoever this jasper was, he had plenty of nerve.

The man on the cliff kept coming down, hanging fast with both hands, feeling fumblingly for footholds. To Jim Andrews it did not look as though there were footholds for a fly up there. It occurred to him that this might be a posse-man coming down to take him in the rear from the rim of the canyon. That business of waving the sombrero might have been only a trick.

Probably the thing to do was to drive a Winchester bullet into the figure and watch him drop. But Jim Andrews made no move to raise his rifle. He had never shot anyone in the back yet, and wasn't going to begin now. Besides, this buzzard had too much sand in his craw to be shot at like that.

More than that, the cliff was going to take care of the job. Beneath the descending man the Hawk could see a smooth drop which no human who ever lived could pass. When the climber got there he'd either have to drop sixty or seventy feet to the canyon rim below, or else climb back to where he came from.

Steadily, the man came down, until his feet were just above the smooth place. Jim Andrews saw him turn his head and try to look down over his shoulder, as though some instinct or some prior knowledge had told him that peril was in his way. And then something like an iron hand gripped the Hawk's stomach and turned it over. For the man on the cliff was close enough now so that his features could be seen.

Jim Andrews recognised his son.

He wanted to yell out a warning, but he did not dare. If anything distracted that boy's attention . . . Yet if he made the mistake of trying to lower himself by a hand hold over that smooth space, he'd never be able to get back. Sweat broke out all over Jim Andrews. He felt in those ten seconds, ten years older. . . .

BUT it was evident that Buck Bellew had either seen his danger or had known of it before, because he began to edge along the top of the smooth space. Flattened against the wall of the cliff, he looked as if he had suction in his hands and body. He edged sideways until he came to an upright fissure about a yard wide, the back wall of which was as perpendicular as the section he had avoided. Then the agonised man in the canyon below saw a trick which astonished him and held him breathless. The boy had gotten into the fissure, sideways, and with his back against one of the side walls and his knees and elbows against the other, he was working himself slowly down.

Wedged in that way, he looked so secure that Jim Andrews had time to wonder how he had gotten there. His mind raced. Had Cole Potter broken his word—or had Ed Carruthers? If so, he determined furiously one or the other of them would hang for it if he ever got out of here alive. But presently what seemed the only possible true solution came to him, and his heart sank. Buck Bellew must be one of the posse.

He was climbing down that cliff merely to capture the Chicken Hawk—unaware that the man he sought was his father.

Thinking that over and seeing that it was certain that the boy would get to the bottom in safety, Jim Andrews began to crawl back toward the spot he had quit. Grimly he was sorry that it had happened this way. It seemed more decent, somehow, to go out with lead in you, in a fair fight.

But maybe it was better this way—it kept him from having to kill any of the posse. One thing was certain, he could not afford to wait any longer. He couldn't take a chance on having the kid see his face. He had to go down into the swift-running darkness of Lobo Creek, conscious and unwounded. He didn't even dare to wait and see what the boy meant to do.

Strangely, as he crawled toward about as unpleasant a death as he could imagine, he chuckled to himself. By God, the kid had nerve! The Hawk wouldn't have thought any human being could have gotten down that cliff. There was a boy to be proud of! It cheered him to realise at the last that it had been worth while. It would have been hell if the kid had turned out no good. But he could hit the long trail satisfied, now.

He got to the creek edge and lay for a second looking down into the fierce black rush of waters. He wondered where they went—where whatever was left of him would end up. Then he gathered himself to plunge over.

"Hey, Dad!"

The voice came low and clear from the canyon rim above him. It galvanised the Hawk into sudden, tense immobility. He could not see the boy because of the overhang. But the words

told him that Buck already knew who he was. Then from the canyon entrance a shot rang out.

Jim Andrews heard Buck curse, and scramble aside. The Hawk whirled, hand going for the Winchester at his side. He came up sitting as another shot rang out. A puff of smoke told him that the rifleman was behind some brush opposite the canyon entrance. Cross-legged, elbows braced on knees, he sighted, squeezed the trigger. The posse-man behind the brush lurched to his feet as though he were hit, and then ran, crouching, for safer cover. The Hawk's second shot sent him plunging down with a smashed thigh.

THERE was no further sound from the canyon rim above, but a moment later Buck appeared on the rim at the side, out of sight of the men outside the canyon. Then Jim saw him beckon, and drop a lariat down the wall.

Jim Andrews grinned. He looked at the canyon entrance, but could see no movement there. Deliberately he searched the brush opposite the entrance with several shots. There was no movement; there was no reply.

He got to his feet and sauntered over to where Buck stood. "How are you?" the boy asked. "Strong enough to climb it?"

"I am, but I'm not goin' to," his father replied. "I'm sorry about this, Buck—sorry you had to find out about it. But I'm not gettin' you into trouble. Go on home and behave yourself."

"Suit yourself," Buck told him calmly. "Either you climb up or I climb down—an' there's nothin' you can do about it."

Jim Andrews thought, "He means it, darn him!"

Aloud he said, "Then I reckon I'd better come up." And he tried to keep the pride out of his voice.

Buck's six-gun leaped up, blasted once. Jim whirled, rifle ready, but whoever had tried to come into the entrance had already dodged back.

"Too far for a Colt," Buck commented. "Send me up your Winchester. I'll keep 'em off your back while you climb."

Jim tied the rifle to the lariat, and Buck drew it up. A moment later the Hawk was going up the knotted rope, the ridges of his jaw muscles standing out in pain, as the muscles of his wounded side tried to do their share of the work. He reached the top, white-faced and gasping, and grinned at his son. "Now what, Doctor?" he asked gruffly.

Buck turned to him with worry in his eyes. "Hurt bad?" he asked. He tried to hide the concern in his voice.

"Hell, no!" Jim Andrews assured him. "A little crease along the ribs—not enough to bother a hopper-grass. Why? You aimin' for us to climb that cliff?"

"It's all I could think of," Buck said apologetically. "You strong enough to cut 'er?"

"We better hurry," Jim said. "Another one of them brave deputies is liable to risk pokin' his head around. If they come into the canyon and start shootin' at us on that cliff, they'll be able to claim it wasn't the bullets that killed us, but the fall."

He picked up the rifle and started for the foot of the cliff.

At the foot of the fissure, Buck held him back. "I know the way better," he said. "Let me go first."

He tied the lariat around his father's waist, and then around his own, leaving about a twenty-foot length between them.

"What's that for?" Jim asked disgustedly. "So if I fall I can drag you with me?"

"No," Buck told him, grinning. "If I fall I can jerk you down. Don't think I'm goin' to let you get out of it alone, do you?"

They started, inching their way up the fissure. It was hard, painful work that brought the sweat of agony out on Jim Andrews' brow, and set his head whirling dizzily. Buck, at the top of the fissure, crawled out flat along the cliff face and got a good grip of the jutting rock with his right hand. With his left he began pulling in the length of lariat, shortening it to help the Hawk in the tricky business of changing from the fissure to an upright position.

"Hey!" he called, noticing that the Hawk had his rifle strapped to a shoulder, "you better let that Winchester drop—it's plumb apt to git in your way on this climb."

"Like hell I will!" Jim told him. "You know how much a good rifle costs?"

He found that at the top of the smooth surface which he had noted while Buck was climbing down there was an uneven ledge about three inches wide. Above, the rock was rough enough to offer handholds. Jim got his feet on the ledge, gripped with his hands and rested his face on the rock. He felt weak and dizzy. After a moment, however, he raised his head, and managed a grin. "Let's go, cow-boy," he said.

Slowly, foot by foot, they inched along the ledge, Buck watching the older man anxiously, until they got to a place where they could begin the upward climb. Buck went up first, climbing swiftly and surely, finding hand and footholds where none appeared to be. Jim, fighting the dizziness in him, looked up, watching his upward progress until the rope tightened, then he, too, started to climb.

WHETHER because of his weakness or of the increasing darkness, he could no longer see very well. He set his teeth and tried to climb faster. If night really was coming on, they would

have to hurry. But that cliff was no place for speed. His foot slipped, jerked his hand-hold loose, and then, sickeningly, he began to fall. As he fell, he remembered the rope, not with thankfulness, but with horror. His fall would jerk Buck from his hold!

The rope jerked taut. Looking up he could see Buck's strained back, could make out one brown hand, gripped and whitened, clinging to a small out-cropping of rock. Jim caught his breath and groped for a hold. He knew he must move easily and quietly.

Buck had held against a jerk, but his grip might have been weakened, might not stand a brusque movement. He found a crevice for his right toe, a jut of rock for his left, got handholds, took the strain off the rope. He let his breath out and rested a brief moment, face against the rock.

When he looked up, Buck was grinning down at him. "Keep a-comin' when you're ready, old timer," he called. "This is a good place to hold to."

When Jim got up to where his son stood, he saw that Buck was standing on a ledge more than a foot wide, and also that the rock was well broken for holds. He had waited where his hold was sure until the older man had climbed up that far.

"There's another good holdin'-on place about twenty feet above," he said cheerfully. "You rest here until I get there."

The Hawk waited. Buck had gotten about fifteen feet above him. And then the thing which he had been waiting for came. The keen blast of a rifle ripped the silence of the canyon below. A bullet smacked the rock almost midway between the two men. The posse had at last dared the entrance and gotten out into the open.

Swiftly the Hawk reached into his pocket and took out a knife. A slash severed the lariat around his waist. Then carefully, hanging fast first with one hand, then with the other, he turned until he was standing on the ledge, facing outward. The canyon was a deep pool of shadow in which he could hardly make out the antlike figures of men behind the orange rifle flashes stabbing upward at him and Buck.

"Keep goin', Buck," the Hawk commanded sharply. "Get your rifle and cover me from the top."

The Winchester snapped to his shoulder as he spoke, barked its defiance at the men below. Down there, a posse-man spun and sat down sharply.

"Come on up, or I'll drag you up," Buck snapped.

The Hawk chuckled. "I've cut the rope. Git goin', you locoed young idjit. You can't help here."

He shot again, and looked up. Buck was already far above him, climbing like a mountain goat. Once his son had heard that the rope was cut he had not even waited for the end of the sentence. The Hawk knew he was racing for a rifle, to get up on the rimrock, a distance away from his father, and draw the fire. But he knew also that it wasn't much use. The men below were shooting wild because the angle was tricky, but there must be some good shots among them, and sooner or later—before Jim could gain safety. . . .

Even as Jim Andrews thought, a bullet smacked the rock within an inch of his left shoulder. The flash had come from a clump of brush. He sighed carefully and squeezed the trigger. But there was no movement, and he judged the shot had gone wide. Hastily he levered and waited, disregarding the other rifles which blazed up at him. They were still shooting a little wide, but the man in the brush was dangerous.

LEAD spatted almost in his ear as a spurt of flame came from the same spot as before, but, the Hawk judged, about two yards to one side. The Hawk swung the barrel of his rifle in a tiny, lightning-swift arc and squeezed. From below, there drifted up to him the thin, far-away clatter of a rifle falling on rock.

Even in the few seconds since the firing had started, darkness had fallen swiftly. It was impossible now to see figures down in the well of the canyon, and the Hawk guessed that he himself was no longer such a clearly limned target as before. He flung a shot at the next spurt of flame, and then turned to climb. As he did so, a rifle barked thinly from the cliff above, and Jim Andrews grinned. The boy hadn't wasted much time.

He climbed carefully now, deliberately, waiting for the shock of the bullet in his back that would send him tumbling, end over end, to the dizzy, distant rocks below. Something stung his right thigh and left it quivering—but he realised at once that it could be only a surface crease, for the muscles held firm.

The bullets which spatted around him were fewer now. Some of the fire had evidently been diverted to Buck on the top of the cliff. Nevertheless, Jim Andrews would not have given much for his chances. Those fellows were getting the range at last.

He kept climbing, more slowly because he had to grope for holds. The darkness was thickening now. If the attack had come a few moments later he would already have the cover of darkness. A bullet plucked at his shirt without breaking the skin. He kept climbing. Above, Buck's rifle kept up a steady tattoo.

Jim could feel his strength giving out. He began to wonder if he could make it to the top, even if no bullet cut him down. And then simultaneously he became aware of two things—no more bullets were coming near him, and the climbing was getting easier. He gritted his teeth, and put everything he had into a last effort. Suddenly, he was falling through space, but he thought bewilderly as he fell that he was tumbling face downwards, and that was impossible. Then something hit him hard in the face. and the darkness became complete. . . .

Chapter V. Outlaw Hide-Out.

BUCK snapped to his feet and raced toward the fallen form of the Hawk, believing that a bullet must have gotten him just as he reached the top. But a hasty examination showed no more than the bandaged wound he had seen before and a shallow rip across the thigh. He knew then that the Hawk had lost consciousness from weakness and loss of blood.

He dragged him from the rim, into shelter. He knew, too, that they must not stay too long there at the top of the cliff. It would take the posse some time to get around to them, but they might be on their way now—if not with the hope of catching them, then to see what had happened to the three men who had been watching up there.

Buck went to where three men, darkened blotches, lay on the ground. He examined them briefly to see that the gags were not choking them, and that the one he had had to wound was not suffering too much. He had taken the time to wind a rough bandage around the man's smashed shoulder before he had gone down the cliff.

"Sorry to leave you like this, boys," he said briefly, "but I reckon your bunch'll be up in a minute."

He slung the unconscious Hawk over his shoulder, and toted him off to where he had left the horses, in a gully a couple of hundred yards from the cliff's edge.

A voice, dry, but with a certain secret warmth in it, came over his shoulder. "What's this—pick-a-back?"

Buck grinned, his heart lightening. "I wouldn't like to ride you on my foot—you're gettin' almost too big for it."

"Set me down, will ya? I kind of like to stretch my laigs a little."

Jim Andrews staggered a little when he was set on his feet, but he hoorawed Buck when the latter tried to help him into the saddle. Once there he sat steadily enough. "Where you aimin' to go, son?" he asked.

"Who, me?" Buck answered, feigning surprise. "I was just for makin' a little ride. Picnic, maybe. If you got any preference, give it a name."

"The boys have got a little hide-out up here," Jim told him easily. "I haven't been there since—a good many years now—but I reckon I could find it. Maybe there's a gent there that I'd like to meet up with."

They rode off in silence. Buck did not ask who the "gent" was, and Jim Andrews did not explain. Explaining would have let Buck in on his grudge against Kane Bisbee, and Jim had a long habit of settling his grudges personally. There was no longer any doubt in his mind that Bisbee had been somehow concerned in the trap at the bank.

And that meant that Bisbee had to die.

They were riding swiftly along a little-known trail. "Who told you about me?" he asked. "Who sent you out to help?"

"Dunno," Buck shrugged. "A feller I never saw before rode up to the spread, and allowed as how you was my dad, and in a jackpot. So I fanned out just to see if he was a liar or not."

"Yeah? What'd he resemble—this feller?"

"Kind of a thin buzzard, with a lace like a edge of a meat cleaver."

JIM ANDREWS frowned. There was something funny here. The man couldn't be anybody but Bisbee, and Bisbee didn't know that the Hawk was Buck Bellew's father. Cole Potter must have spilled it. But when, and why?

"How'd you happen to finally get sure it was me?" he asked after a while.

"Didn't," Buck told him briefly. "When I got to the top of the cliff I couldn't see you at all, so there wasn't anything to do but come down an' take a look-see."

Jim Andrews pulled up his horse. "Listen, son," he said. "I figure that the feller that saw you up there on the canyon rim couldn't be sure it was you—maybe I didn't know you from a black jughead. Now, I want you to show some sense. You've got me out an'—well, I reckon you know how I feel about it. But I don't want you ridin' outside the law. I been to considerable trouble to keep you from it. You high-tail it for your spread an' act plenty innocent. Even if folks suspicion you, there won't be any proof, an' Ed Carruthers won't be wantin' to nail you for helpin' your dad out of a jam."

Buck told him about the three men on the canyon rim—two of them had know him slightly. "It don't matter anyway," he said. "From now out, you an' me are ridin' together. What's good enough for you is good enough for me, I reckon. The law can ride to hell, if you're outside!"

Jim Andrews led the way, with the long memory and the infallible instinct of his kind, through a maze of canyons and draws toward the heart of the Comino hills. But when they had been riding for nearly three hours Buck saw the older man sway in the saddle.

"I'm kind of tuckered, Dad," he lied. "What do you say we rest the seat of our pants awhile?"

He saw the older man grin, and knew that he understood.

"I forgot how soft you young fellers were," the imperturbable reply came. "All right. Let's cook us up some grub. They won't be trailin' us to-night, and I reckon we can find a safe spot to make a little fire."

Buck knew by that that his guess had been right. The Hawk could not have stayed in the saddle much longer. When, later, he helped dress the latter's wound he wondered at the iron will which had let him go on that long.

The older man was asleep. Buck sat up in his own blankets and rolled a quirley—his nerves too jumpy and his mind too excited after the events of the day to let him sleep. Oddly, his thoughts were not so bitter as he would have expected a few hours before. Pain ripped through him whenever he thought of Netta Carruthers, but he tried to put that out of his mind. He had a hunch that his inner hurt never would get any better, that he would carry the image of her with him until the day of his death. And that until that day, his least thought of her would stab him like the blade of a knife.

But he knew, too, that Netta, and with her all the life he had hoped to live, was lost to him for good. He had made his choice, in that bitter moment at the Bar Double B, and there could be no going back. The thing to do, he told himself through clenched teeth, was to close his mind to it.

What surprised him was the sense of compensation he had. He had lost much, but he had gained something, too.

He had never really known his father, and without knowing it he had been hungry for the affection and companionship which may exist between a man and his son. He had that now, in a way that he could never have hoped for otherwise. He knew

that between him and this man who was the Hawk existed a new bond—of warmth of understanding, of mutual confidence. Together they would ride the dim trails, face the dangers and take the risks. If it had not been for Netta, he would have been almost glad that it had happened this way.

NEXT morning, Jim Andrews was in visibly better shape. His wound showed no signs of infection, and food and sleep had done much for him. They were on the trail at dawn, riding cautiously and keeping under cover as much as possible. But for the first two hours they saw no one. The posse, if it was combing the hills for them, was evidently far off the scent.

Then suddenly, Jim Andrews drew up, and glanced back at Buck with a warning gesture. An instant later Buck heard the thing which had brought the older man to a halt—the faint ring of hoofs somewhere to their left. The Hawk slipped from his saddle and climbed out of the narrow draw up which they were riding. A few moments later he was back, an enigmatic expression on his face.

The draw into which they had ridden led into a wider ravine some fifty yards ahead. At a signal from the Hawk, the pair rode up and took a position just at the corner of the junction. Buck's ears told him now that the riders, whoever they were, were coming up the ravine. He wondered at his father's taking a position where they could scarcely hope to escape discovery.

The hoof-beats drew steadily nearer, and presently four riders came into sight. At sight of the two silently waiting figures in the draw they drew up short, hands racing instinctly toward gun-butts.

To Buck's amazement, his father sat motionless, eyes steady, face bleak. For one of the four riders was Cole Potter. Another he recognised as the thin man who had come to the ranch to tell him about his father.

"Howdy?" the Hawk said curtly.

For just an instant, it seemed to Buck that the ranchman's face paled a little at sight of the Hawk. But if there had been any fear in him, he recovered almost at once.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed heartily. "I heard you'd got away from 'em, Jim. I was hopin' you'd come up this way."

"Were you, Cole?" The Hawk's voice was dry, with an edge of danger in it.

Potter appeared to ignore the sardonic significance of the tone. "I sure was Jim," he said heartily. "When I found out from Kane here how they had you holed up, I was plenty worried about it."

But Buck saw that his eyes were nervous. And the thin man was worse than nervous. He was white around the mouth.

The Hawk's eyes shifted to the other two riders. "Who are these gents?" he demanded grimly.

"They're all right, Jim," Potter assured him hastily. "I brought 'em up because—well, because we've got two vacancies. An' I'm mighty sorry to say it, too."

The whirl in Buck's head was beginning to subside, although his astonishment continued. It began to be obvious to him that Cole Potter was in some way a member of his father's gang, or at least connected with it.

The Hawk's voice was harsh. "Are you forgettin' that I run my own bunch and choose my own men?" he asked coldly.

"Now, Jim . . ." Potter began placatingly. Buck saw that one of the two strange men had slipped his hand toward his gun-butt again. He saw, too, that they were hard-looking customers, and that they had none of the nervousness in front of the Hawk that was shown by Potter and the thin man.

"Either keep your hand away from that iron or claw for it, hombre," his father's voice rasped out suddenly.

The man hesitated a fraction of a second, then moved his hand away from the gun. Buck's own arm was tingling. There was trouble in the air here. A child could have seen that. Just why it was, or what form it would take when it came, he did not know, but he knew that anything—a word, a look—might set it off.

The Hawk's eyes fixed themselves bleakly on Kane Bisbee. "How come you didn't stop up there on the slope, like you said you would, to lead the posse off me?" he asked.

BISBEE said through lips which were obviously dry, "I couldn't. I hadn't more'n got there before a bunch of riders come from the other direction. If I'd stayed, I'd have been cut off."

Buck saw his father hesitate, his eyes hard, and again he felt that premonitory tingle in his gun-hand. Four to two. In a close-up fight like this that was long odds.

But the Hawk apparently forgot the existence of Kane Bisbee, to judge from his manner. He turned to Potter. "We'd better get up to the hide-out," he said curtly. "I've got some things I want to talk over with you."

Buck saw that his father fell in behind the other four, knew that he was taking no chances of a bullet in the back. Something in a troubled glance the older man shot him made him think that he would have forced a show-down with these men if it had not been for his, Buck's, presence.

The ravine led them through what appeared a blind canyon into a narrow concealed valley. Entering, they went down to a

wooden shack, so cleverly hidden in a grove of pinon that anyone who did not know of it existence would scarcely have noticed it.

Once at the hide-out, however, the Hawk made no effort to talk to Cole Potter apart. But the tension continued. Buck saw that Jim Andrews's hands were never far from his guns, and that he never let one of the others get behind, although his manner was casual, hard, indifferent.

From the talk he learned that Cole Potter had been for years undercover man for the gang, and he judged that it was Cole who got the information on which the gang's robberies had been based. The knowledge increased his old hostility to the man. It was like him, he thought. to take the coward's end. To get his money without risking his skin.

He wondered if his father suspected Potter of having double-crossed him by giving Sheriff O'Brien advance notice of the Clay City robbery.

He remembered Potter's triumphant look at him at the wedding, and he guessed that there was some sort of understanding between the rancher and Kane Bisbee.

At the first chance, he got his father aside, and told him what he had been thinking.

The Hawk smiled thinly. "I reckon you've hit it, kid," he said, "but there's nothin' we can do now. I'm gettin' both of 'em—an' I reckon they know it. If they had the nerve they'd go for us now, but I figger they haven't. They'll wait for a better chance, just like I'm doin'. We'll sit tight for now. Just keep your eyes open, and make out to play along."

Potter and Bisbee, Buck saw, were talking apart, and after a moment they went into the shack. He had a hunch they were putting their heads together, planning something. And all through him, his nerves seemed to tingle as he halted his hand in its instinctive movement toward his gun.

Chapter VI. Branded for Boothill.

KANE BISBEE'S nerves had reached the breaking point. Since he had learned, the evening before, that the Hawk had actually escaped from the Lobo's Grave, there had been sick fear in his stomach.

He was under no illusions as to what his fate would be if the leader he had betrayed caught up with him. And he had cursed Cole Potter for the slick plan which had resulted in this disaster.

Potter when he learned that the Hawk was trapped in a spot from which there was no chance of his getting out, had seized on the occasion for settling another score—a score which his fear of the outlaw leader had prevented him from settling long before.

Buck Bellew had been a lot in Potter's way, and men who got into that position usually had hard luck. Potter had meant to have Buck killed as soon as the Hawk was dead, but the unexpected announcement of his marriage to Netta Carruthers had caught the ranchman off-guard. He had been powerless to prevent it, and he had too high a regard for his skin to risk an open play against Buck while the Hawk was still alive.

As soon as he learned, however, of the Hawk's situation, a plan had occurred to him. He was a shrewd judge of men, and he guessed, rightly enough, that if Buck was told that the Hawk was his father he would abandon even his wedding to go to the outlaw's help.

Kane Bisbee had assumed his part in the plan with some reluctance. Since his open treachery, he wanted the Hawk dead, and he didn't want to give him even the shadow of a chance to get out of that death. But Potter, confident, had over-persuaded him. There seemed no chance whatever that Buck could be of any real help to his father.

There was every chance that he could do no more than get himself into trouble with the law for nothing. And with Buck publicly uncovered as the son of the Hawk, riding outside the law because he had come to his father's help, there wasn't much possibility of his marrying the daughter of Sheriff Ed Carruthers. The plan had worked perfectly—excepting that Buck had succeeded where he should have failed.

Since then, Kane Bisbee had died in his own imagination many times. He was a good, fast hand with a gun, was Bisbee, but he had seen the Hawk draw, and he knew he had no chance with him.

"We got to jump him now," he said wildly to Potter. "He's tricky as a wolf. He'll get us if we wait."

"He'll get a couple of us if we don't," Potter informed him grimly. "And you and me'll be first. But I've got an idea that's worth six of that."

"To hell with you and your plans!" Bisbee snarled. "They don't work. The trap you set in Clay City didn't work—the plan you had about that darn kid not only didn't work, it's like to get us salted down for keeps. I'm sick of you and your plans."

Potter caught him by the arm. "Shut up, you fool," he ground out, in a low tone. "You want the whole world to hear you? Now, you listen to me. I've got a way to get rid of this buzzard that won't cost us anything. What's the matter with you; don't you want to live to spend that gold of his?"

"If I don't," Bisbee sneered, "you'll never spend it."

The ranchman looked wry. It was Bisbee who had managed to find out where the Hawk cached the gold he had been

taking from his mine, and Bisbee had been wise enough not to tell before its owner was safely dead.

HIS knowledge had been the reason for the trap which Potter had set for the gang in Clay City. At the time it had looked like an easy out. Neither of the pair cared to try to kill the outlaw leader in any other way. It was not easy to dry-gulch such a man, and as long as Pecos Jack was alive it was doubly unsafe to try to murder the Hawk. Pecos had been almost as poisonous with a gun as was his friend and chief.

But Potter had fattened himself too long by having other people pull his chestnuts out of the fire. And the idea which had come to him in the last few minutes seemed to him to have a simple brilliancy which was irresistible.

He alone of the gang guessed why the Hawk had stubbornly refused to set foot in Comino County. He had known Jim Andrews in the old days, when Jim was a rising young rancher whose best friend was young Ed Carruthers, newly-made sheriff of the county.

It had been Carruthers who had had to arrest Jim Andrews for the murder of Con Brady, and who had set out on Andrews' trail when the latter had escaped from gaol. Later, the gang, of which the Hawk was head, had pulled a robbery in Comino County. Carruthers had set out to capture them, but had himself been caught instead. The gang wanted to kill him because he knew too much, but Jim Andrews had defied the gang at the risk of his own life and gotten Carruthers away.

From that time on, the gang had never operated in Comino County, and Andrews had never set foot in it. Shortly afterward, Buck Bellew had come to live in Comino obviously under the sheriff's protection. Potter guessed that Andrews had made a deal with Carruthers—that he would stay out of the sheriff's territory in return for the sheriff's silence as to the Hawk's real identity.

Now, however, Andrews had broken his part of the agreement, and Potter knew Carruthers well enough to know that he would not hesitate to do his duty—that he would go after the Hawk as ruthlessly as he would any other law-breaker. His plan, therefore, was to send Carruthers word—to tell him where the Hawk could be found—then sit back and wait results. If there was one man in the country who could down the Hawk in a gunfight, that man was Sheriff Ed Carruthers. If Andrews succeeded in killing the sheriff, then the posse would kill Andrews. For the Hawk, with that early murder conviction against him, had sworn never to be taken alive.

It suited Potter to get the sheriff out of the way. Ed Carruthers was too honest, for one thing. For another, he had op-

posed the rancher's suit for Netta's hand. If things came off as Potter hoped, he'd be killing two birds with one stone.

It was this plan that he poured into the dubious ears of Kane Bisbee.

"Yeah," the latter objected, but there was a certain sudden gleam of interest in his narrowed eyes, "an' where'll we be when this posse shows up? If we leave, the Hawk'll smell a rat and high-tail it."

"Don't worry about that," Potter told him. "I'll manage to get one of the boys away on some excuse, and we'll put the other one on guard up at the valley entrance. When the posse gets in sight, he'll give us a sign, and we'll git out all right. All we got to do is to say that we were watchin' 'em so they wouldn't get away."

Bisbee's eyes gleamed with sudden hope. "It might work at that," he breathed.

"Work?" Potter said contemptuously. "It can't help but work. They haven't even got their bronc's saddled. They won't have a chance."

Chapter VII. Outlaw Heritage.

NETTA CARRUTHERS had spent that morning between grief and fear. Her elation at hearing of Buck's exploit and his escape had turned to dread when she learned that the Hawk and his son had almost certainly taken refuge up in the Comino Hills. That meant that her father would be forced to go after them.

Her anger at Buck had evaporated before he had been gone from the Bar Double B ten minutes, despite the necessity she had been under to face the curious and pitying looks of the crowd when it had been learned that the wedding was off and the bridegroom gone. A few minutes' thought had shown her that Buck had been forced to take the stand that he had, and she knew in her heart that she would have lost respect for him if he had not done so.

That and fear for his life had cured her anger, though not the pain she suffered at the knowledge that now they might never marry. She knew that no consideration would deter Ed Carruthers from his duty. He would go after the Hawk.

And in fact, Ed Carruthers had ridden out early to cut for sign near the cliff up which the two had climbed to safety. Netta, unable to bear the inaction of staying at home, had gone to the sheriff's office where she had a chance to hear the first news. And she was there, talking to Jack Tully, the deputy, when a strange rider pulled up at the door and handed in a note.

"For the sheriff," he said. "If he ain't here, you better read it."

Tully took the note, and without any further parley the rider spurred down the street and disappeared.

Netta read the note over his shoulder and gasped. It said:

"The Hawk is holed up in the Hidden Valley next to Bald Rock. I'm keeping an eye on him in case he decides to fan out. Buck Bellew is with him. Get a posse and come a-fogging it.

"COLE POTTER."

"Whew-w!" Tully whistled. "This is big! I've got to get to the old man with it right away." He grabbed his hat, and ran for his pony.

Meanwhile, Sheriff Ed Carruthers, after following a sign that led from the cliff's edge, had lost the trail, and reluctantly had turned back toward town. It would be necessary now to get a posse and start a thorough combing of the hills. By the time they picked up sign again, he found himself hoping that the Hawk would have left the county.

Instinctively, he had felt that this was a personal affair between him and Jim Andrews, the man who had once been more than a brother to him. It had been he who had collected the evidence which had convicted Jim of murder and driven him outside the law, and he had been forced to believe, against every impulse in him, that his friend had been guilty. Yet when, after the trial, Andrews had out-witted him and escaped, he had been glad. When, later, he had learned that Jim Andrews was the Hawk he had jumped at Jim's promise to keep out of his jurisdiction in order that Buck Bellew might live in Comino County free of the outlaw strain.

THAT promise of silence which he had kept for years had always been a little on Ed Carruthers' conscience, but he had no sense of relief now that he was free to break it. He knew that Jim would not surrender, and he knew that he must take him if it lay within his power. He knew that if he found Jim, the finish would be in gun-smoke, and his heart was heavy with the knowledge. Yet if it must come to that, he had wanted the odds to be even. He hadn't wanted a lot of posse-men baying at Jim Andrews like wolves around a bogged-down steer.

He was on his way back to town when Jack Tully found him and delivered the note. Carruthers read it through narrowed eyes. Cole Potter! And how had he learned where the Hawk and Buck Bellew were? The old sheriff spat disgustedly. Trust Potter to know the things that honest men did not know! Still, it was information—information that his conscience would have made him investigate, even if Potter's name on the note had not made it official suicide not to investigate.

He glanced calculatingly at the sun. "Thanks, Jack," he said grimly. "I reckon I can make it up there before dark. You get on back to town."

"Hell, Ed," the deputy protested. "You can't go on a job like that alone. If you won't ride back and deputise a posse, at least let me go with you."

Ed Carruthers's face was granite. "You go back to town, Jack," he repeated. "I'm playing this hand alone."

Back at the hide-out, the rider who had slipped away had returned, without bringing reinforcements, somewhat to the unspoken surprise of both Jim Andrews and Buck. The day had passed in a sort of armed truce, with the two parties eyeing one another warily. Jim Andrews was trying to get back some of his strength while he figured a way out of involving Buck in the showdown which was bound to come.

It was sunset when the guard at the gate came in, escorting a rider whom Buck recognised at once.

"It's Netta!" he exclaimed, jumping to his feet. And then he groaned, "Jumping snakes! What's she doing up here?" For on the heels of his elation at the sight of her was the realisation that her presence made a dangerous situation even more dangerous—and placed Netta in a perilous position as well.

Cole Potter was also on his feet, staring, with a look which combined consternation with astonishment. Behind him, Kane Bisbee edged unobtrusively toward one end of the shack.

When Netta rode up, Buck saw, her eyes were fixed on Cole Potter, and were beginning to blaze with indignation.

"What are you doing here, Cole?" she challenged hotly. "Pretending to be Buck's friend while you betray him?"

Buck saw Potter shoot a hunted glance toward the Hawk before he replied, "I—I don't know what you're talkin' about, Netta."

The girl flared, "You just sent a note to Dad, didn't you—tellin' him that Buck and his father were here?"

"No, I didn't," the rancher snarled, but even at that instant he knew the game was up. Like a flash his hand lashed for his gun. The movement caught Buck off-guard, but not Jim Andrews. The worn Colts disappeared magically from the shiny holsters on his thighs, and as magically appeared in his rock-like hands. Both bucked and roared together. Cole Potter grunted heavily, stood swaying an instant, and then went down on his face, his gun only half out of its holster.

BUT the Hawk didn't wait to see him fall. Whirling, he was blasting lead at Kane Bisbee, whose guns bellowed from behind a corner of the shack.

That first movement of Cole Potter's had come as a surprise to Buck, but it had surprised Potter's two hired gunmen, too. The three raced for their Colts in the same instant. And of the three, Buck Andrews, son of the Hawk, was the fastest. His single gun leapt up blazing death as the other two cleared leather. For a few seconds the air was thunderous with the sound of exploding powder, and then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over.

The gunman who had ridden in with Netta lay writhing on the ground, with a slug through his stomach. The other, shot through the hip and the chest, was on the ground in front of the shack, moaning. Kane Bisbee lay still at his corner, a bullet between his eyes.

Feebly, Colt Potter reached for his fallen Colt, tried to raise it. The Hawk strode to him and kicked the gun from his hand

"Darn you!" he gasped, his eyes venomous. "You—got me—but I've got—you, too. Plenty! I ruined your darn—life—you fool. I framed you in Clay—City. I—broke your darn—mealy-mouthed kid. I drove—you outside the law in the first place. It was me that killed Con Brady an' hung it on you—an' then—used you to make money—for me. I've—made a fool of . . ." His voice broke off, choking, but his eyes still looked hate. "See you in—hell," he muttered before he died.

Jim Andrews stood, his face graven, expressionless. "So it was you, you skunk," he said softly.

From the pinon a voice cracked out, harsh and deadly. "Get 'em up—both of you. Reach for air and hang on!"

Jim Andrews and Buck had holstered their guns. For an instant, Jim hesitated. His back was to the speaker, but he recognised that voice, and knew that even he could not whirl and draw fast enough. Or perhaps he did not want to. Slowly he raised his hands, and Buck did likewise.

Ed Carruthers stepped out. "I'm takin' your guns," he rapsed. "One funny move out of you, and I'll let you have it."

"Ed," Jim Andrews said gently, "I don't reckon I could get myself to kill you if I had the chance, but you've got me. Only—give the boy a chance, won't you? Let him go."

Carruthers had lifted the guns as the other spoke, and now he stood silent. Andrews turned. "The kid's straight as a die—you know that," he pleaded. "Give him his chance."

"A chance to run from the law the rest of his life?" Carruthers asked. "No, Jim. I'm takin' him in, too. They may let him off altogether, or they may not. His best chance is to get square once and for all—not do like you did."

JIM ANDREWS bent his head. "I reckon you're right, Ed," he said. "Let's go—you can't hang me any more for killin' Con Brady, but I reckon there's plenty more they can hang me for."

Ed Carruthers said, "I'm sorry, Jim," and his face looked like that of a man on the cross.

"Oh, Dad!" Netta cried. "You can't do this—you can't."

But Carruthers scarcely heard her. There was a queer expression on his face, as though his mind were groping at things that weren't yet clear.

"What did you mean when you said they couldn't hang you any more for Con Brady?" he asked.

"Cole Potter did it, and framed it on me. He just confessed it."

"You mean—you mean you didn't kill Brady?"

Netta cut in. "I heard Cole tell it, Dad. Cole did it!"

Carruthers looked dazed. "And I rail-roaded you for it," he said slowly.

"Oh, hell—you couldn't help it," Jim said, looking embarrassed. "The evidence was against me."

"But I didn't believe you," Carruthers went on as though thinking aloud. "I could maybe have tried harder to clear you. I might have done it—saved all this."

He stood for a long moment in silence, while the others watched him curiously, sensing the struggle inside him. Then his jaw set decisively, his hand went to the star on his shirt. He ripped it off, tossed it away.

"I reckon Comino can get another sheriff, Jim," he said. "I'm resignin' here and now. An'—I'd like to shake your hand, Jim."

Jim Andrews's voice was a little husky as he answered: "Hell, Ed, there never was a time when I wouldn't have been proud to take it."

Netta Carruthers went into Buck's arms with a little cry. "I guess we're all outside the law now," she said softly, tears of happiness running down her face.

Jim Andrews said, "There's three of us goin' to the Argentine now, Ed—I reckon you better make it four."

And from Ed Carruthers' grin it looked as though he thought so, too.

JUSTICE WHILE YOU WAIT.

BY OWEN OLIVER.

UMPH! You think the law's slow, do you? So it is. So it ought to be!

No, I don't say that just because I am a lawyer. I'm a man first and a solicitor afterward. I sympathise with your desire to settle the matter out of hand; but I don't believe in "justice while you wait," as you put it. I've heard that phrase once before, and I never want to hear it again. Sit down and I'll tell you. Don't be nervous. I shan't charge it on the bill.

It happened thirty years ago, when I was a young man of six-and-twenty. I didn't wait for things, in those days. I was sitting at my desk—this very desk—one morning, when I heard that my young brother was ill at the diggings and wanted to come home. I sailed that very afternoon. Three weeks to the day—conveyance was slower then—I was astride a horse, in a strange country, within a few hours' ride of my brother.

I wasn't quite sure of my way, so I rode up to a sign-post that stood near a clump of trees. It was made of three strips of wood nailed in a triangle round a tree-trunk. The names had been tarred on it, but the rains had washed a good bit of them off. While I was puzzling out the remainder, half a dozen men rode

out from the trees—rough-looking chaps whom I took to be cowboys—a name that I had learned only a day or two before.

"Hands up!" they shouted, and six revolvers were pointed at me.

I held up my hands, and they seized them and tied them behind my back.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

The Story of a Lynching that Should Have Been.

"Darned Britisher!" cried one as soon as I spoke. He was a stout, jovial villain with a gingery beard. They called him Yellow Sam.

"Take you to a convenient tree," said a huge fellow with a squint, "and string you up."

"Trees enough here," suggested a little ferret-faced fellow to whom I took a particular dislike.

"'Tain't fair to do the boys out of their fun," objected a drunken desperado who reeled in his saddle. "Things are dull enough nowadays."

"Them as hunt have the skins," another growled.

"He's going to the camp," said a thin, very American-faced fellow who seemed to be the leader. "That's the committee's rule, and I'm not taking a hand against them."

"Nor I," said Yellow Sam. "Seen the old Colonel pip an ace at twenty yards, five times out of six; and Broken Bill ain't much worse with his shooter. 'Tain't go as you please since we elected that committee."

"More fool you to have a Vigilance Committee," the ferret-faced man remarked. "We didn't waste time over committees at Troy Town. Caught a skunk and settled a skunk, and settled him as you pleased. That was our way."

"Or passed him on to another camp," suggested Yellow Sam sarcastically. "And when he came to Rome he had to do as Rome does, not Troy. Come along sons, you're keeping the gentleman waiting."

They started off at a canter, driving my horse between them.

"But what have I done?" I inquired, as I jolted along.

"Taken a ticket for eternity, sonny," said the drunken man.

"But——" I began.

"Don't waste breath," the thin man interrupted. "You've got about ten minutes. If you've any special messages to send, think them over. We'll pass on your money or anything of that kind. We're not thieves, see! And we'll make up a little note

to say that you met with an accident, which was much regretted, you being popular and respected. We don't need to hurt people's feelings.

"But why are you going to kill me?" I persisted.

"It's our way with thieves," he said.

"I'm not a thief," I declared. But they all laughed; and when I repeated the statement, they laughed again."

"You're riding a stolen horse," one told me, "and that's good enough for us."

I tried to explain; but they whipped up the horses to a gallop, and all the breath was jolted out of me. You've no idea how a horse jolts when your hands are tired and you've enough to do to keep your balance.

We soon reached a collection of log huts. "Rome" was set out on a plot of ground in front of the huts, in letters made up of large white stones, and the name was also painted on the door of the post-office. I learned afterward that the place was called "Rome Rendez-vous," and was the resort of those who found the more respectable settlements too hot for them. A large hut in the centre was evidently the store and bar. My captain whooped and yelled, and about forty men trooped out, headed by a sharp-faced old man with white hair and a pointed white beard. They called him "Colonel" and treated him with a good deal of rough respect. He looked at me with a kind of fierce benevolence, and patted my horse gently:

"This is a sad business," he remarked. "A very sad business." He shook his head.

"Caught the 'possom napping," the thin man explained; "not three miles from here, too!"

"Not three miles!" said the Colonel He looked at me admiringly. "I like nerve—always did! But you can have too much of a good thing, stranger. Too much nerve spells ruin! Still I admire it. Hi, Jim! Bring out a cocktail, and charge it to me. Just a little tribute to nerve, sonny!" He patted the horse again. "You took him within three miles, eh?"

"By the sign," said the thin man. "Tried to bluff us, too. Rode up and pretended to be puzzling it out, as if he hadn't seen us, and looked as innocent as a baby! Quite surprised when we took him. Couldn't make out what he'd done to be treated in this harsh manner!"

The crowd roared with amusement.

"I don't know!" I shouted.

"Well," said the Colonel mildly, "you'll soon know more than we do!"

He nodded toward a man who had brought out a new rope and was making a noose at one end of it. He seemed to be familiar with the operation.

"Surely," I expostulated, "you're not going to kill an innocent man in cold blood and without hearing him?"

"Listen to him!" cried Yellow Sam, and they roared as if I had said something funny.

A man in his shirt-sleeves brought out a cocktail and held it up for me to drink. I swallowed it, though it half choked me. I saw a man standing on a ladder to adjust the rope over a branch of a tree.

"Well boys?" the Colonel asked. "Anybody got anything to say before we get to business?"

A BIG man with a broken nose stepped forward—an ungainly, broken-down man.

"There ain't been no trial, Colonel," he objected.

"What's the good of a trial when he's caught with the horse?" expostulated the ferret-faced man. "When I was at Troy Camp—"

The broken-nosed man held up one hand. The other hand fingered his revolver affectionately.

"If you was at Troy Camp," he said gently, "where there isn't no law against shooting as you please, you wouldn't dare so much as to breathe near me!"

"Good old Broken Bill!" someone shouted.

"And if you like to ride over to Troy Camp with me," said Broken Bill, "you can, and the one that comes back won't be asked no questions."

"Never mind about Troy Camp," the Colonel said. "That ain't the point. The question is, do we want a trial, or don't we?"

"'Tain't a question of wanting," Broken Bill objected. "It's a question of law and order. If you make rules and regulations, you've got to stick to them. That's what I say."

"Vote for old Broken Bill and law and order!" the drunken man shouted boisterously.

"Well," said the Colonel, "there's law, and there's sense. Seems to me you can put the case in a nut-shell, and it don't need to be a cokernut! Here's a stranger. Here's Jim Sand's horse. Here's a rope, noose at the end fixed up convenient. That's sense, Bill, aint' it?"

"You can't have sense and law too," Bill growled. "And you elected to have law, and you elected a Vigilance Committee and a president"—he bowed to the Colonel, who returned his salute gravely—"and officers." He bowed round him, and the individuals concerned returned the compliment punctiliously. "And

you wrote it up on paper over the slate in the bar. 'Nobody's to be put out without a fair trial'—that's what it says. You can't keep up respect for law if you make a laughing-stock of it just because there's no sense in it—or because there is, either!"

"Well," the Colonel admitted, "there's reason in old Bill's argument. We said we'd have a trial, and a trial we'll have. But this gentleman's a good sport, I can see. I make no doubt he'll save waste of time and plead guilty; and even old Bill won't want to argue any more about it then, eh, Bill?"

"Not if he pleads guilty," Broken Bill agreed. "But I don't know as he does, and seems to me he don't." He frowned at me as if to say, "Now's your chance."

"I am not guilty," I said. "I bought the horse. I did not know that it was stolen. I—"

"Wait, wait!" cried the Colonel. "If there's got to be a trial, we'll have everything in order. Hi, boys! Leave that bit of string for a minute and come over here. There's going to be a trial."

"What's the good of a trial?" several grumbled.

"No good," said the Colonel. "But we've laid down that we'd try everyone fair before we did justice on him, and it don't take long, and passes the time, and pleases old Bill!"

"Good old Broken Bill!" someone shouted; and they jostled each other into the store.

THEY took me in, still bound, and sat me on a packing-case. The men stood or squatted in a ring round me. The Colonel sat opposite to me in a damaged arm-chair, and directed the proceedings.

"You're first, Jim," he said. "Is it your horse?"

A quiet little man stood up and said yes.

"Anything else to say?" the Colonel asked, and the little man said no.

"You all know that this gentleman was caught with it," the Colonel went on. "I take it no one wants evidence as to that?" He looked about him, and nobody objected. "Then that's the case for the prosecution," he pronounced.

"I've got questions to ask," Broken Bill interposed.

"You can ask them afterwards," the Colonel ruled, "if you ain't satisfied when you've heard the defence."

He turned to me.

"Let's have it as short as is convenient to you," he commanded. "Who are you, where did you come from, how did you come by the horse, and any other reason why the law shouldn't take its course."

"My name is George Raikes," I said. "I am a solicitor—"

"Here!" cried the Colonel. "You've no cause to say anything against yourself. We're a fair court, and I suggest that you leave your profession out."

"That's fair," said Broken Bill, who seemed to have appointed himself as my counsel; and I resumed my defence.

"I live in London. I came out by the 'Scotsman' three weeks ago. "My brother is at Stanley Diggings. I heard that he is ill and destitute—"

"What's that?" a dirty, bloated man asked.

"Stone-broke," the Colonel explained. "The jury need not expose their ignorance of the language; there's a dictionary in the bar."

"I came to West Junction by the railway," I continued, "and then to Paris Park by coach. I started from there this morning by cart, but it broke down. So I walked. When I had been walking for about an hour, I met a man. He seemed to be partly English—I mean white—and partly native."

"Half-breed," the Colonel interrupted. "All thieves."

"I didn't know that. I'm new to the country. He had that horse. He said he'd just bought it from a gentleman who let him have it cheap, and he'd sell it to me at a bargain. I was anxious to get on quickly, so I gave him one hundred and twenty dollars for it. I asked him for a receipt, but he couldn't write. That's all. It's the truth."

"Umph!" said the Colonel. "Anyone got anything to say for the prosecution?"

There was a whispered conversation. Then Yellow Sam stepped forward.

"If we're going to take a yarn like that," he said, "anyone can get off anything. It's only what he says, and no proof; and all I say is this: We took him on the horse, and in the old days no one wouldn't have wasted time over questions, but just shot at sight, and that's sense; and if the law's against sense, let's alter the law." There was a chorus of approval.

"You can't alter the law till the trial's over," the Colonel said. "'Twouldn't be showing ourselves proper respect. Anyone else want to show what he can do as an orator?"

He paused, but no one answered.

"Then that's the case for the proescution," he announced. "Anyone for the defence?"

"Me," said Broken Bill; "and I want to ask a few questions. Jim Sands, when did you lose this horse?"

"Some time last night," said Jim, "leastways, this morning."

"Some time's no time," said Bill. (I couldn't help fancying that he had been a lawyer!) "Do you know, or don't you?"

"Well," said Jim, "I heard him neigh 'bout four o'clock, just before it was light. Know his voice among a hundred. He must have been took then."

"Oh!" said Bill. "Why must he?"

"He couldn't have been took before," Jim apologised. "That's what I meant. You mix me up with all them questions, Bill. I ain't no lawyer, and never was!"

"Now,"—Bill turned to me—"got any proof where you were this morning?"

"You can send to Paris Park," I said, with sudden hope. "If you fetch the man who owns the hotel, he'll be able to tell you that I slept there, and—"

"Here, here!" the Colonel protested. "We can't wait for an eight hours' journey each way. It's justice while you wait in this court, stranger!"

"What's the use of a trial, if you won't let me produce evidence?" I wanted to know. But the Colonel waved me into silence, and Bill into further speech. He evidently regarded the latter as my counsel.

"Got any bill or paper?" Bill suggested.

"Why, yes!" I cried. "I had a letter from a friend of my brother's. It came in at seven o'clock, just before I started. It's in my pocket—the left-hand one, inside."

BROKEN BILL came and fumbled in my pockets—my hands were still tied. He turned over the contents till I indicated the letter. It bore a rough postmark, with the date inserted in red ink. He handed it round for inspection, and the feeling of the court appeared to change in my favour.

"I needn't point out to you gentlemen," Bill said, "that he couldn't have took this horse after four this morning, got over there for the letter, and back again. The post arrives at Paris Park at seven, as you know. That's the case for the defence."

"And you can see from that letter that it's true, what I told you about my brother," I added. "And the other documents in my pocket"—my friend Bill had replaced them—"will show you that I'm what I say I am."

"Best say nothing about that!" the Colonel advised. "A lawyer's always done something! Well, my sons, I've got to sum up, and my summing up is this. Guilty of being found in possession of a stolen horse, which is good enough to hang any man; but, seeing that he didn't steal it, he's recommended to mercy. All in favour, hold up their hands!"

All hands were held up—the ferret-faced man delaying till Bill whispered in his ear—and the Colonel nodded approval.

"The sentence," he said, "is that you're set free; and you can have what you like to eat and drink, and the Committee foots the bill. Everyone satisfied with that?"

"Well," said Bill, "it's all right, Colonel, but not so handsome as I'd looked for from you. We've hindered him some from getting on to his sick brother, and I was half expecting you'd offer to lend him a horse—supposing, for example, I was willing to go with him and see it safe back."

"On these conditions," the Colonel said, "I'll lend him my bay mare. She's worth any two animals for fifty miles round."

"She's that," Bill agreed.

They untied me, and rubbed my cramped arms, and gave me plenty to eat and drink, and forced tobacco upon me, and were generally friendly.

The Colonel himself came and talked to me. I'd "got off very light," he said. A man who bought a strange horse from a stranger—and he a half-breed—took all risks, and it was better to hang a few innocent men than to miss hanging a horse-thief. At the same time, he added, he was not sorry that I had got off. An acquittal once in a way did not disturb the general confidence in the Vigilance Committee, but it was a thing that he would not like to see happen too often.

They all shook hands when I rode off with Broken Bill, and waved their hats, and I waved mine. Bill was moody and thoughtful. He was no talker, he informed me gruffly, and he scarce spoke during our four hours' ride.

When we reached Stanley Diggings, I dismounted, and Bill took my horse's reins.

"If you take my advice," he said, "you'll get your brother off by the train at four a.m. from Sandy Flats. You'll just do it if you're sharp. Mistakes will happen, and I don't want them to hang an innocent man."

"I am deeply grateful to you," I said. "If it had not been for your belief in my innocence—I don't know why you were so sure about it!"

Broken Bill laughed a curious laugh, and whipped up the horses.

"I stole that horse myself," he said, over his shoulder, "and now I'm going to have this one!"

I thought that the Vigilance Committee might connect me with the matter, so I took my brother off by the coach at two a.m., as he had recovered sufficiently to travel. We caught the train, and when we left it we went straight aboard a ship for home. I didn't want to wait there for justice. I preferred to take my luck in this old-fashioned country, where we make justice wait!

THE RATTLER ON THE RIDGE.

BY CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER.

A MAN was moving among the rocks and bushes of a long, high ridge. He flitted here and there—noiselessly—like a shadow. His movements were cautious, catlike, and he placed his feet carefully, after the manner of the hunter stealing upon his prey. Yet something in his actions; something about the grim, hard lines of his face; something in the furtive, doubting, and cunning glances with which he scrutinised every bush, rock, and crag in his vicinity, proclaimed him not the hunter, but the hunted.

He halted often. Sometimes it was behind a bush, sometimes behind a weirdly-shaped rock or a gigantic boulder; frequently it was behind a clump of shrubbery. But always when he halted it was behind something. Not once did his figure rise above the skyline. And always he crouched. When he crossed an open place, he did so on his stomach, wriggling, and twisting, and squirming over the hot sand, the prickly cactus, and the jagged

rocks in a tortuous fashion, slowly, with numerous pauses, his face wreathed in a bitter snarl, his lips muttering curses, his eyes glittering malevolently. In such a manner might a wounded beast drag himself to his lair.

There seemed to be no need for the man's caution. Besides himself, there seemed to be no living thing on the ridge; no living thing on the vast, dead plain below. In the shallow draws and gullies and on the lower ridges nothing moved; nothing moved in the great blue arch of the sky except the sun—a disc of shimmering silver. All was silent, peaceful, motionless, slumberous. The world seemed suspended in a vacuum. And yet the man proceeded cautiously, always crouching, always watchful, always going toward the crest of the ridge.

The Story of a Snake and an Outlaw.

In an hour he came to the edge of a sandy open place, about twenty feet across. Crouching behind a mammoth boulder, he estimated the distance with crafty calculating eyes. On the opposite edge of the open space was a thicket of scrub oak about fifty feet wide. Near its centre rose a pile of jagged rock, surmounting the ridge. From here a man might view the entire surrounding country within a radius of ten miles, and be safe from discovery. For two hours the man had kept his summit in sight; it was the goal for which he aimed. From it he would be able to see many things.

He slipped down upon his stomach and wriggled slowly and noiselessly forward—squirming, twisting—laboriously working his way toward the scrub oak thicket. In ten minutes he was deep into it, squatting on hands and knees, panting and exhausted.

For a long time he remained motionless. Then, about to move forward, he suddenly sank flat to the tangled floor of the thicket, his eyes gleaming, his head raised, his body rigid. On the other side of the thicket something had moved.

For five minutes the man remained motionless. Then his right hand went slowly back to his holster and was withdrawn, grasping the stock of his heavy revolver. He poked the muzzle of the weapon through the stunted brush, toward the point whence the movement had come. Again he waited. And then, presently, a voice came—low, even, but startlingly resonant, in the perfect silence.

"He's sure somewhere in these hills," it said. "I figger that he'll make tracks for the Colorado line—likely hittin' Purgatory Crossin'."

The man in the thicket showed his teeth in a tigerish grin. He had recognised the voice; he knew that on the other side of the thicket Bent Allen, the sheriff of Colfax County, was standing, scanning every foot of the surrounding country for a glimpse of him. He knew that the man to whom Allen had spoken was his deputy; that these two men were sworn to take him back to Dry Bottom—dead or alive. The grin on his face paled, and was succeeded by a venomous sneer. They would never take him back—alive. Long ago had he decided on that.

There was no further sound from the edge of the thicket. Evidently the deputy had coincided with the sheriff's views. Yet the man in the thicket did not move. He could easily imagine how the two men looked, standing at the thicket's edge, watching the plains—for him. Allen he knew personally, and it was easy for him to conjure up a mental picture of the grim and patient sheriff, standing on the summit of the ridge, leaning on the muzzle of his rifle—waiting.

Waiting. The man in the thicket snarled. Waiting for him. He snarled again, one corner of his mouth slanting upward satirically. It seemed strange to him that Allen had anticipated his trail; that he stood now within ten feet of him, awaiting his coming. He had always felt a sort of fear of Allen; there was something about the grim, quiet, easy-going sheriff that had always given him a queer, qualmish sensation in the pit of the stomach. He hated Allen because of this feeling, though the men had never passed a word in anger. But he knew that Allen had measured him; that when their eyes met, it was his soul that cringed away from the sheriff's—that in the sheriff's eyes was a gleam of understanding of perfect knowledge.

Allen knew him for what he was. The world—Dry Bottom's world—might fear him, might know him for an outlaw; a desperado whose reckless disregard for human life had made him a terror to the country; and made his name feared wherever men congregated. But Allen did not fear him—that he knew. He could see this when his eyes met Allen's. The sheriff had a way of looking at him, of squinting his eyes at him, of studying him, which seemed to hint of a mysterious knowledge. It was as though Allen could read the future, and knew that one day he would have to deal with the man alone, that Fate had marked them for a clash, and the gleam in Allen's eyes when he looked at the man said more plainly than words that he was measuring him, comparing him, to himself, that, when the clash came, he would make no mistakes.

And, curiously, the man came finally to understand that Allen would make no mistake. This thought was continually in

the man's mind—it became an obsession that he could not shake off. One day he and the sheriff would clash, and the sheriff would come off victorious. The man could feel it. In some subtle manner Allen had made him feel his inferiority; the man had fought against it, but in his heart he knew that it was so.

And now, concealed in the thicket, not over ten feet from Allen, he realised dimly that a chance was offered him. He was in a position to thwart Fate; to speed a bullet that would forever set at an end the silent, wordless enmity that had been between them from the first; that would avert the clash that he knew must come. Yet it seemed that he was not to take advantage of it. He crawled nearer the edge of the thicket, near enough to make out the figures of the two men who stood there, their backs to him. He slowly raised the muzzle of his weapon until it was trained upon the middle of Allen's back. But he did not press the trigger. At the instant that he had raised the muzzle of the weapon, he had become aware of a sound—a pecliar, dry buzzing that seemed to express all the hate and venom that had accumulated since the Scriptural warning: "Thy heel shall bruise his head, and his head shall bruise thy heel."

The man's flesh crawled with a sudden fear. In front of him, not over an arm's length distant, was a gigantic diamond-back rattler. He saw its dirty coils; triangular head erect, forked tongues darting, its venomous, lidless eyes still glittered evilly and warningly.

The man again raised the weapon. Again arose the peculiar, dry buzzing, filling the thicket. Again the man lowered the weapon; again the buzzing ceased. The man shrank back a little, his blood chilling. He saw Allen turn, and he sank prone to the floor of the thicket, among things that pricked his face and hands. He heard Allen's voice.

"I reckon that there rattler ain't feelin' exactly tickled over somethin'." And then arose Allen's laugh, filled with a peculiar, dry humour, as he turned his back again to the thicket.

The man lifted his head and resumed his former posture, though retreating slightly. Again he raised the muzzle of the weapon. Again the peculiar, dry buzzing filled the thicket. The triangular head was raised higher this time, and the forked tongue darted more rapidly.

A COLD horror gripped the man. He did not fear the snake, though he knew that the flash of his revolver would rouse the reptile to action. And, since retreating, he could no longer get a clear view of Allen's back—numerous gnarled and twisted branches of scragly oak interposed. A bullet would have been deflected, and the man could afford to take no chance. He

retreated a little more, to give the rattler a chance to make off with good grace. But the reptile seemed in no fear of him, merely lowering its head and watching him. For a long time he lay quiet, looking at it. Then again he heard Allen's voice.

"I reckon we're wastin' time, standin' here. If we've missed him he's probably sneaked around the hills. In that case we'd better be hittin' the breeze to Purgatory Crossin', so's to head him off."

The deputy's voice in assent. "He's plum sick," he said. "Mebbe he'll go by way of Purgatory Crossin', an' mebbe he'll think we're waitin' for him there an' sneak back to Dry Bottom to see that girl of his."

Allen laughed grimly. "Mebbe he will," he returned; "that'd be just like him. But I've fixed for that. Before we left I swore in Clem Miller an' Lefty Andrews. I reckon they'll take care of him right an' proper—if he goes back."

The deputy snickered. "I'd call that right foxy of you," he commented; "the chances are that he's plum lonesome without seein' his girl."

"An' hungry," added Allen. "A man that's gone for two days without grub might be accounted to have a good appetite for it. An' if he's anyways close to Dry Bottom, he might take it into his head to sneak back, trusting that nobody'd touch him." He laughed. "I reckon that if we'd happen to get sight of him now there'd be one of two things happen. Either he'd come up tame an' be willin' to eat of our hands, or he'd make a plum lovely fight."

The deputy's voice was earnest. "If I've got him sized up right, he'd fight," he said.

"Shucks," sneered the sheriff. His voice was a slow, contemptuous drawl. The man in the thicket stiffened with a sudden, murderous rage, but listened further.

"I don't reckon that he's so all fired dangerous," continued Allen. "I've had him sized up for a right smart while. If you'd call him a mean, sneakin' coward you'd about have his measure. Him shootin' Bud Hiller in the back proves it."

ALLEN moved away from the edge of the thicket; the man could hear dry twigs breaking under his feet as he went. He raised his head. He heard twigs breaking at a greater distance. The voices of the two men came to him also, gradually dying away.

Ten minutes passed. The man stood up, crouching, to see Allen and the deputy mounting their ponies at the bottom of the ridge. He saw them ride away at a slow chop-trot; saw them disappear behind a lower ridge. Then he rose and stretched him-

self to his full height, a mocking grin on his face. A peculiar, dry buzzing reached his ears, and, with a malevolent sneer, he suddenly stooped, seizing a heavy stone and hurling it with unerring aim at the rattler. The snake was shattered; the man stood over it, cursing bitterly.

"You was on his side," he sneered, his teeth clenching at the words that writhed through them. He climbed to the summit of the jagged rock that stood near the centre of the thicket, and strained his eyes for a sight of Allen and his deputy. He saw them presently, far out on the plains, riding toward the river. For a long time he sat, watching them. He saw them ride down into a gully near the river, and they did not appear again. He smiled mockingly.

"So you're figgerin' on waitin' there," he said. "Well, I ain't figgerin' that I'm goin' that way—just now."

He swung round, scanning the country on the other side of the ridge. A mile away a timber clump dotted the centre of a little basin. A small adobe hut snuggled the edge of the timber clump; a chimney rose, with smoke curling lazily upward out of it, befouling the clear blue of the sky. The man's eyes glittered. In two days not a morsel of food had touched his lips. He took another glance toward the gully into which Allen and his deputy had disappeared. He smiled sardonically. Then he clambered down from the rock summit into the thicket.

He halted for a moment to shake a fist at the sinuous, writhing body of the rattler, knowing that according to tradition, it would not die until sundown. Then he passed out of the thicket, making his way down the sloping side of the ridge. He moved noiselessly—like a shadow—but swiftly. And his movements were cautious, catlike, and he placed his feet carefully like the hunter stealing upon his prey. Occasionally he halted, crouching behind a rock or a bush to look at the cabin that snuggled the edge of the timber clump. He made long detours, keeping his body oncealed as much as possible. But always he approached the cabin.

WITHIN the cabin the woman worked over the kitchen table, kneading flour into soft dough. She worked the dough listlessly, as though kneading it were a disagreeable task. Beside her a small, cast-iron stove roared, its top glowing red. Some pans were near, ready to receive the dough when she had finished it. She seemed not interested in her work, for she sighed often, and many times left the table and stole noiselessly to the doorway of an adjoining room, peered cautiously within, and retreated as cautiously, her eyes filling with a sudden moisture.

Occasionally she hesitated in her work, leaning her hands on the table top and looking out through the window with a longing, intense gaze. Once, as she turned from the window, a sob shook her. Again, while she looked out of the window, the man stole in through the open doorway and stood near it, watching her. She turned presently and saw him. He stood near the wall—a lank, haggard figure—forbidding and menacing. His lips were tensed over his teeth in a savage snarl; his huge revolver threatened her. He made a startling picture with his unshaven face, his cruel lips, his wolfish eyes, and the gun.

The woman did not scream or faint, but allowed the dough to fall from her hands as she turned with a sharply indrawn breath, and faced him.

"What do you want?" she said, in a strained, quavering voice.

The man's eyes glittered. "Grub," he returned shortly.

The woman left the kitchen table, and went a a bench near the door very close to the man, where there was a tin basin half filled with water. From this she washed her hands, the man watching her, with narrowed, alert eyes. She left the basin and went to a cupboard in a corner, taking out some cold meat, some bread, and vegetables. These she placed on a table. Then she hesitated and looked at the man.

"Coffee?" she questioned.

The man nodded, a slow humour softening the wolfish gleam in his eyes. He watched her pour water from the kettle to the coffee-pot, still standing beside the door. Five—ten minutes passed, and steam arose from the coffee-pot in clouds, a strong aroma filling the man's nostrils. His eyes gleamed hungrily.

"That's enough," he commanded. The woman poured coffee into a cup, and the man left the door and pulled a chair to the table, motioning the woman to another which stood near.

"Set down," he commanded.

The woman obeyed, but her eyes shone duskily through the moisture in them, and her gaze went often to the door that led to the adjoining room.

The man ate hungrily, ravenously, without regard to form or custom, taking the food into his hands and forcing it into his mouth, his cheeks bulging. He made noises with lips, his eyes gleamed greedily—like those of an animal feasting upon some favoured food with satiety distant. It was disgusting, bestial. But the woman sat and looked at him, though not seeing him. And, as the man ate, he cast furtive glances at her out of the corners of his eyes, the heavy revolver lying within easy reach. In such a manner had the woman seen a dog eat—devouring that which was within reach, but keeping a greedy, warning eye against

interruption. But the man finished presently, and then turned abruptly to the woman.

"You got a horse here? An' a saddle? An' a bridle?"

The woman nodded to each question. The man's eyes flashed with satisfaction.

"I'm borrowin' them," he said. He rose and walked to the door, standing on the threshold, sweeping the basin with rapid glances. He turned and looked at the woman.

"I'm thankin' you, ma'am," he said, with the first full smile that she had seen on his face. "You've give me a good feed. I'll see that the horse which I'm takin' gets back to you some time. I'm figgerin' to remember you for what you've done for me. "What's your name?" "Allen," returned the woman.

The man's lank figure slowly stiffened, and he averted his head so that the woman could not see the sudden glitter that had come into his eyes. He turned and retraced his steps, standing beside the table, both hands upon it, his body bending forward from the hips, his lips curving into a derisive, ironic smile.

"You the sheriff's wife?" he demanded.

The woman nodded. She watched him fearfully, her face alternately reddening and paling. There had come a change into the man's manner; a something had come into his eyes which she had not seen there before—a mocking, humorous light, the meaning of which she could not fathom.

"Do you know where your husband is?" he demanded.

"No," she returned dully; "I have not seen my husband in three days."

"Well, I've seen him!" flashed back the man, his lips curling venomously. "He's at Purgatory Crossin' now, huntin'—huntin' for me." He laughed ironically, triumphantly. "An' I'm here, in his cabin, eatin' his grub, and borrowin' one of his horses. I reckon you can tell him when he comes that—!!"

THERE was a sound from the adjoining room. The man's hand flew to his right hip, drawing his pistol. With a bound he cleared the space between him and the door, and he stood in the opening, alert, menacing. But the woman darted past him, and was suddenly down on her knees beside a small wooden bed, in which lay a boy of six or seven. The boy's lips were drawn, his face pallid, his eyes wide open and staring with mingled horror and fear into those of the man.

The man heard the mother's voice, soft, reassuring; saw her hand gently patting the boy's wasted cheeks. His own suddenly paled, his shoulders dropped guiltily, and his broad hat came off and dangled from his lowered hand. Stealthily he returned the pistol to its holster.

"I wasn't knowin' anybody was sick," he said, in a chastened voice, meeting the mother's gaze. His face reddened. "I wouldn't have made so much noise." He backed away from the door, replacing the hat on his head. "I'll be goin' now, ma'am,"

The boy's eyes lighted, he struggled and raised his head.

"Where are you going?" hequestioned. "To get my dad?" He lay back again, a satisfied light in his eyes. "Mother wanted the doctor awful bad," he added, smiling faintly, "but she couldn't leave me, she said—and dad was away, huntin' a bad man who had done something over in Dry Bottom." The woman was enjoining him to silence in a low, intense voice, but he continued confidently: "You tell dad to hurry right home—we need him awful bad." He smiled. "But first I think you ought to get the doctor. I've heard mamma cryin' an' wishin' he'd come."

The man halted, standing in the centre of the kitchen, grim lines coming into his face again.

"I reckon you want the Dry Bottom doctor, ma'am?" he said, slowly.

The woman rose from beside the bed, her eyes gleaming hopefully. She came as far as the door and steadied herself against the jambs, looking at the man, searching his face with anxious eyes. A shadow crosser her face presently, her eyes drooped away from his, she relaxed and leaned disappointedly against the door-jamb—crushed over the hard expression that she had seen in the man's eyes.

"Of course you can't do anything," she said, dully, hopelessly. "You won't do anything. I should have known that."

The man's thoughts went rapidly back to the rock-crested summit of the ridge. Lying in the thicket, he had heard Allen tell his deputy that he had appointed two men of Dry Bottom to take him should he return there. He knew the two men; he had little doubt that they would carry out their orders to the letter. Rankling in his heart was a recollection of the epithet "coward," that Allen had applied to him as he had lain concealed in the thicket. His lips twisted venomously, his eyes lighted with the old, wolfish, ironic gleam. The woman saw, and turned her head, leaning against the doom-jamb—shuddering. For a long time she rested ther, waiting for the sounds which would tell her of the man's departure. And then suddenly she heard his voice.

"You got a pencil an' a piece of paper?" he questioned.

She procured these for him, and placed them upon the table. The man seated himself and wrote. Then he arose and strode rapidly to the door.

"When your husband comes, give him that," he commanded.

She heard the whiz of his spurs as he went out, and she sank into a chair beside the table, sobbing softly. A few minutes

later she caught the sound of rapid hoof beats. The man had departed.

AT dusk on the following day, Allen stood on the threshold of the open doorway of the cabin, reading the brief note which the man had left. The woman stood beside him, looking at him with wide, moist eyes.

"Ben Allen," read the note. "This mornin' I wuz on the ridge an' I heard yu tel youre deputie that I wuz a coward. I wuz goin' to shoot yu, but a rattler got in the way. I reckon yu heard him buzzin'. Later I cum to yore shack. Yore boy wuz sick an' needed a doctor mighty bad. There wuzn't anybody to send for a doctor, an' yu duz too far away for yore wife to go. I had my chancst to git even. But I ain't gittin' even with women an' kids. I'm goin' for the Dry Bottom doctor. If I git past Clem Miller an' Lefty Andrews I'm hittin' the breeze to Trinidad. If yu think I'm a coward cum there for me.

"very trooly,

"the man who wuz on the ridge."

For a moment Allen looked out over the basin, where the shadows of the night were lengthening. The summit of the ridge stood out clear and sombre above the shadows. Allen shuddered. Then he turned to the woman and drew her to him, holding her tightly.

"Did he get the doctor?" he questioned hoarsely.

Without replying the woman seized him by the arm, and led him to the door of the room that adjoined the kitchen. The boy was propped up in the bed, his eyes very luminous in the dusk.

"Hello, dad!" he shrilled. "I'm a heap better. To-morrow, I'm going to get up."

Allen's arms were gripped tightly about the woman. Presently he held her away from him and looked at her with grim, steady eyes.

"You must have heard from the doctor," he said slowly. "Did he get away?"

"Clean," she returned, smiling gravely up at him. "Clem Miller was shot in the shoulder—but not bad; and Lefty Andrews had a leg broken with a bullet. The doctor said he never saw a man shoot so fast."

"I reckon he wasn' so much of a coward," he said, a queer catch in his voice.

The woman smiled up at him through the tears in her eyes.

"Are you going to Trinidad after him, Ben?"

Allen looked gravely down at her. Some pieces of torn paper slowly fluttered from his hands.

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